

AESTHETICS OF WOMANHOOD IN HEIAN JAPAN

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This study acts as a response to questions surrounding the position of women in the Heian court as encountered by earlier scholars. To that end this study examines the construction of the Heian concept of femininity with regard to both women of the lady-waiting and elite classes, as illustrated in diaries and court records. The findings indicate that the aesthetic of womanhood oftentimes related to an ideal of female passivity in romantic relations with men and of selflessness in involvement in major court decisions. This aesthetic was physically manifested in the attention given to the sequestration of women of high rank. However, evidence suggests that this aesthetic did not mean that women were not influential, in part because this aesthetic was an ideal that did not necessarily reflect reality.

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To the memory of Nishikawa Misa

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Heian era of Japan (794-1185) is known for the predominance of influential nobles in the Japanese capital of Heian-kyō (present-day Kyoto). Despite the existence of an emperor, nobles exercised control over official court documents, maintaining such a monopoly by simultaneously limiting the access of their inferiors to noble rank. To further cement their influence at court, large noble clans (*uji* 氏) such as the Fujiwara 藤原 established the practice of setting up their clanswomen as consorts to the emperor while the practice of regency granted additional political influence at court.¹

For a nobleman, an important aspect of courtly social climbing was impressing others with dress and cultural refinement. Not only did a man need to look his best, dressed in tastefully chosen layers of silk, he also needed to be savvy enough to navigate the established norms of court ritual and behavior. Very little about a nobleman's life was beyond the criticism of gossip, placing great pressure on a man to conform to the social expectations of his gender. To this end noblemen worked to acquire sources of income: rural estates, governorships and wealthy patrons, using the funds to cloth themselves and their households.²

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1. William H. McCullough, "The Capital and its Society," in *Heian Japan*, ed. Donald H. Shively and William H. McCullough, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. John Whitney Hall and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 123, 126, 127.
 2. Helen Craig McCullough, "Aristocratic Culture," in *Heian Japan*, ed. Donald H. Shively and William H. McCullough, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. John Whitney Hall and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 400, 401.

While they did not participate in the competition for official court positions by the latter part of the Heian period, the women in these noble households were also greatly concerned about their physical appearance, oftentimes being evaluated on their ability to put together an ensemble (jacket, train, many-layered robes, perfume and fan). Spending a great portion of their lives inside, women also occupied themselves with music, calligraphy and writing.³ This project attempts to peel back the layers of screens and curtains surrounding these female inhabitants of the court to shine light on the construction of femininity as they themselves may have understood it. In this way my work is part of an ongoing scholarly interest—to be outlined below—in reassessing the presence and participation of women in court life regardless of their official status.

This project examines both the aesthetics of femininity in the late Heian court as well as the implications those aesthetics make with respect to evaluating the position of women in society. In this sense my work participates in an on-going reevaluation of the nature of the Heian court, specifically with regard to characterizations of the Heian court as existing in a state of decline. Bruce Batten argues against the interpretation that saw the Heian court as existing in a state of administrative decline with regard to the provinces. Instead, he argues that the transformation of the *ritsuryō* system should be seen as evidence of the court's ability to adapt the system of administration to fit its needs.⁴ Similarly, scholars such as Karl Friday⁵ challenge earlier notions about the

3. McCullough, "Aristocratic Culture," 394-397, 405.

4. Bruce L. Batten, "Provincial Administration in Early Japan: From Ritsuryō Kokka to Ōchō Kokka". *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*. 53, no. 1(1993): 103-134.

5. Karl F. Friday, *Hired Swords: The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1992), 170.

ineffectual governing practices of the court. My project aims to contribute to this reevaluation of earlier supposed decline of the Heian court by looking not at government officials or warriors but at the everyday lived experiences of court women, who—as I will show in the succeeding chapters—were deeply invested in the functioning of the court. In addressing court politics through the lives of women, particularly those studied most frequently for their literary contributions, this project highlights the necessity for historians to not overlook the significance of literary documents that offer valid and compelling insights into the social world of the Heian court. Indeed, as I hope this project illustrates, an important aspect of these women’s lives was their relationship to literature, as it served as a means by which they and others around them ascribed meaning to their lives. For this reason this project focuses on the meaning—the aesthetics and performance—of femininity. I believe that the Heian court can easily appear inscrutable for its strong emphasis upon aesthetics and in response this thesis demonstrates the importance of considering the significance of aesthetics as major element of human relations.

In Chapter II I examine the writings of women of the lady-in-waiting class in order to assess their own concept of the gendered role of women at court. My argument comes as a response to recent scholarship by (and criticisms of) Joshua Mostow with his argument that Heian women of the lady-in-waiting class wrote primarily to serve the political agendas of elite male patrons while having little voice themselves and being able only to complain about the injustice afforded to women. Specifically I address the writings of Sei Shōnagon, Murasaki Shikibu, Izumi Shikibu, Michitsuna no Haha, Hon’in no Jijū, and Sarashina. Sei Shōnagon, Murasaki and Izumi are of particular interest in that

Murasaki actually gives reference to the other two in her writings, thereby giving an example of the kind of social context in which Sei Shōnagon and Izumi constructed their portrayals of themselves.

My main objective is to examine the process by which this class of women forged their construction of ideal female behavior and how this impacted their relations with each other and with the wealthy male patrons with whom they formed alliances. To this end I address topics such as Murasaki's negative comments about Izumi's relationship with a prince as well as Izumi's response to such criticisms in her own writing. An important point that I make in this chapter is that the construction of femininity for these women arose out of tension within this group as they struggled to find a middle ground between the two extremes of failing to garner the financial support of male patrons and rousing the jealousy of their peers.

Chapter III examines the lives of the high ranking women whose entourages of attendants include some of the women from Chapter II and builds upon the work of Fukutō Sanae and Takeshi Watanabe in revisiting the role of elite women at court. This chapter assesses the rhetoric of elite female authority, the conditions under which their authority was seen as legitimate and the situations under which it was not. My focus for this chapter is on the lives of three women closely connected to the renowned statesman Fujiwara no Michinaga—his older sister Senshi, his wife Rinshi, and his daughter Shōshi. My main sources are *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* and *Ōkagami*, two chronicles of court events centering largely on the life of Michinaga. Unlike Chapter II, which addresses writings believed to be the work of the women themselves and therefore raises the issue

of individual intent in self-representation, this chapter examines portrayals of Senshi, Rinshi, and Shōshi and attempts to explain why they were portrayed in the ways that they were. In this way Chapter III addresses issues of what might have been omitted about these women as well as what was recorded. For instance, despite statements regarding the supremacy of Rinshi's position at court, the texts say little about her apart from her role as mother. Although Senshi receives greater attention than Rinshi, descriptions of her influential role at court are complicated by the fact that she is almost invariably portrayed as acting for the benefit of her male relatives. Despite descriptions of Shōshi as being deeply involved with her father and the Emperor, little attention is given to her participation in her father's political maneuverings.

To offer an answer to the dilemma of these texts' simultaneous recognition of the importance of these women while offering little information about their participation in the workings of court politics, I argue that the fading tradition of selecting women as sovereigns complicated the ways in which elite women could appear to act upon their authority. As a result, women like Senshi, Rinshi, and Shōshi exercised their authority by participating in alliances with male family members, such as Michinaga, who were able to exercise the authority that the women possessed to the mutual benefit of both parties.

Drawing on themes from Chapters II and III, Chapter IV addresses the issue of the public/private sphere dichotomy with regard to the Heian court in the context of issues raised by such scholars as Hitomi Tonomura and Cameron Hurst. I approach the issue of separate spheres by analyzing the feminine aesthetic of seclusion and controlled visibility. For this chapter I address both visual sources and textual references to

seclusion and viewership and consider their significance in the context of portrayals of men and women of varying social statuses. Topics include depictions of Emperor Murakami watching his consorts while obscured by blinds as well as textual references to high ranking women who are assumed to be beautiful on account of their rank.

One phenomenon that emerges is that the consideration of both rank and gender is essential to understanding the significance of an individual's visual status and that neither complete visibility nor invisibility were optimal states of being. Moreover, the visibility (or invisibility) of low-ranking individuals carried an entirely different meaning than the visibility of an elite individual. An account of Empress Teishi's fall from status is marked by ex-Emperor Kazan's authority to deprive her of her secluded space and render her visible to individuals of low status. At the same time, a mark of social failure for imperial consorts was a lack of presence at court, an issue highlighted by the great attention given to descriptions of consorts' visually ostentatious entries into court.

While controlled visibility was relevant to both men and women, in this chapter I argue that the significance of a woman's beauty meant that controlled visibility held an additional significance to women that it lacked for men. In concluding this chapter I therefore argue that it is most useful to consider the Heian court as based around a series of household units that are neither entirely private nor public.

CHAPTER II

CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER AMONG LADIES-IN-WAITING

In this chapter I explore the writings of several women of the *nyōbō* (lady-in-waiting) class in order to assess how the class of women serving the elite may have constructed gender roles. Specifically, I address the works of Sei Shōnagon, Murasaki Shikibu, Izumi Shikibu, Hon'in no Jijū, Sarashina, and Michitsuna no Haha. My objective is to address the ways in which these women constructed notions of the feminine and how this understanding can better facilitate an understanding of the Heian court world view, particularly with regard to the place of women. While scholarship on the position of women of this class at court paints a complicated image, my hope is that examining the opinions of these women themselves can help to shed light on how they themselves might have viewed the boundaries for proper female conduct.¹

The images of the ideal woman that emerges from the writings of court ladies are complicated. As individuals acting as go-betweens for male courtiers and the elite women they served, the merit of ladies-in-waiting was very much connected to their knowledge of social etiquette and charm. The patron-client relationships formed in these situations could be a significant source of material support for ladies-in-waiting, particularly those

1. Joshua S. Mostow in particular makes the claim that female authors of the Heian court wrote to promote the interests of their male patrons while at the same time complaining to each other about the unfairness of their situation. Linda H. Chance remarks that Mostow's interpretation implies that court politics was anathema to female authors and that their writing allowed them little opportunity to exercise their own voice. My work is a response to this issue.

lacking the financial assistance of a wealthy family or husband.² And yet, the writings of these women reveal that it was also important to not draw too much attention to one's skills and talents or to appear as too willfully manipulating of their male patrons. In this sense the writings of ladies-in-waiting offer a window into the politics of court culture, where a woman's failure to draw the attentions of a wealthy patron could result in her inability to secure the material wealth necessary to support her lifestyle. At the same time, the social intimacy engendered by living within close proximity³ to peers facilitated the development of a culture of gossip and rumor. As will be discussed in an examination of the diary of Murasaki Shikibu, the living arrangements of court life provided very little in the way of separate, personal space for ladies-in-waiting and ladies who wrote their thoughts down could not be guaranteed their privacy. Moreover, as will become clear through an examination of other diaries, many women exhibited a concern for how other ladies perceived them, regardless of whether or not the thoughts were recorded. The gendered role of women as expressed in their writings therefore reflected both the need to acquire the attention of patrons and of the necessity to avoid raising the ire or jealousy of other ladies-in-waiting. To this end the reader can observe a variety of agendas in the writings of these ladies as they constructed narratives that favored their own interests and also avoided becoming subjects of resentment or scorn.

2. Yoshikawa, Shinji, "Ladies-waiting in the Heian Period" in *Gender in Japanese History* vol. 2, ed Wakita Haruko, Anne Buchy and Ueno Chizuko (Osaka, Japan: Osaka University Press, 1999) 289, 294, 300.

3. Both in terms of shared residency spaces for ladies who were part of a single household and terms of the proximity of residences as a whole, given the practice of nobles to live physically close to the imperial court.

While the sources I use in this endeavor are not strictly autobiographical in the sense that the women are known to have made use of fictional elements, sometimes borrowing from literary tropes, I believe that they are nevertheless useful in gaining an understanding of the values that these women may have held. In this sense I am more interested in addressing the ideological reality indicated and shaped by these personal narratives rather than in assessing the factual reliability of the sources themselves. In this effort I am greatly indebted to the work of Hitomi Tonomura for her use of literary sources to reveal patterns of gender construction in premodern Japan.⁴

Sei Shōnagon

Sei Shōnagon 清少納言, a lady-in-waiting to Empress Teishi,⁵ recorded numerous thoughts and opinions on the state of court life in a work known as *Makura no Sōshi* 枕草子, (Pillow Book) Examining this text can give much insight into the thoughts and values of one particular woman whose life otherwise remains largely unknown. What emerges regarding the character of Sei Shōnagon is that she was a woman very much concerned with the evaluation of her peers, giving the suggestion that gossip played an important role in shaping the concept of acceptable female behavior. Perhaps nowhere is the harsh and often vitriolic nature of courtly competition more apparent than in this text, and while the harsh criticisms of other ladies offered by Sei Shōnagon could in part be a personal trait of Sei Shōnagon herself, an examination of the writings of other ladies-in-

4. Hitomi Tonomura, "Black Hair and Red Trousers: Gendering the Flesh in Medieval Japan". *The American Historical Review*. 99, no. 1 1994: 129-154.

5. Sei Shōnagon's dates of birth and death are unknown though she likely lived during the late 10th and early 11th century. See Chapters III and IV for a discussion of Teishi's situation at court.

waiting illustrates that the gender policing powers of gossip and rumors extended to the lives of other ladies as well. The comments that Sei Shōnagon makes frequently relate to a sense of aesthetic propriety, ranging from such things as speech and behavior to makeup and dress. For Sei Shōnagon, being a lady-in-waiting involved necessary attention to these elements of aesthetics. In this way Sei Shōnagon's writing shows how one aspect of the political dimension of the feminine was the policing of aesthetics by other women. By political I refer to Joshua Mostow's claim that female diarists were writing merely on the behest of their male patrons and his assumption that female diarists had a limited ability to benefit socially from their writings.⁶

While it might seem that Sei Shōnagon's comments about female propriety are random in nature there are common threads running throughout. Sei Shōnagon seems to have prided herself on her cleverness and wit and as we will see in the incident with Narimasa provided below she was not afraid to give voice to her own interests. Yet Sei Shōnagon is fairly adamant about the futility of displaying jealousy toward a husband for his relations with other women. Moreover Sei Shōnagon's assertion that women who live alone should give the appearance of being in a state of desolation and need suggests a kind of careful presentation of women as needing the material support of male courtiers wealthy enough to provide a higher standard of living.

6. Joshua S. Mostow, *At the House of Gathered Leaves: Shorter Biographical and Autobiographical Narratives from Japanese Court Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004) Other scholars argue that the writings of women did serve the interests of the female authors, in particular John R. Wallace in his article "Reading the Rhetoric of Seduction in Izumi Shikibu Nikki," though this work does not address broader issues of gender relations outside the example of Izumi Shikibu.

Makura no Sōshi provides a clear example of the kind of scrutiny that a woman at court would undergo on a daily basis as well as the attitudes toward those who fell short of the ideal. Fukutō Sanae remarks on this ideal as being conformity to a particular notion of feminine beauty.⁷ In this way Sei Shōnagon's writings underscore the political dynamic of women's lives at court. Sei Shōnagon is discerning in her views of propriety, giving long lists of potential social blunders: not rewarding messengers, failing to make necessary appointments, not replying to letters, or being too casual in speech. One can only wonder at the embarrassment of the women Sei Shōnagon ridicules in her writing: ladies whose combs accidentally fall out of their hair to be smashed in the streets and ladies whose faces are crudely powdered. For instance, in describing the visit of noble ladies to the imperial palace⁸ Sei Shōnagon mentions that the textures of the ladies' faces are visible through the blinds of their carriages, their skin showing through their makeup like earth under melting snow.⁹

Sei Shōnagon's account of Empress Teishi's move into the house of Senior Steward Narimasa provides several examples of her views on the proper relationship between men and women. To begin with, as Sei Shōnagon and the other ladies-in-waiting approach the residence they realize that the gate of the house is too narrow for their carriages to enter and that they have no choice but to walk the distance on foot. This might not have been terribly embarrassing if it were not for the fact that many of the

7. Fukutō Sanae, *Heianchō no onna to otoko: kizoku to shomin no sei to ai* (Tōkyō: Chūō Kōronsha, 1995), 77-80.

8. The annual near-year visit of nobility to palace, taking place on the seventh day of the first month.

9. Sei Shōnagon, and Ivan I. Morris, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 2.

ladies were disheveled from the journey and had not had time to tend to their appearances. To make matters even worse, a group of male courtiers happened to be nearby. Sei Shōnagon describes the men as staring at the ladies “in a most irritating fashion.”¹⁰ As the senior lady-in-waiting Sei Shōnagon upbraided Narimasa for the state of his gates.

“‘Well, well’ she said, ‘you really are a disgraceful man! Why do you live in a house with such narrow gates?’”

“I have built my house to suit my station in life, he laughingly replied.”

“‘That’s all very well,’ Sei Shōnagon retorted, ‘but I seem to have heard of someone who built his gate extremely high, out of all proportion to the rest of his house.’” With this comment, Sei Shōnagon is referring to Yu Ting-kuo leading Narimasa to praise her for her vast knowledge.¹¹

Sei Shōnagon’s conversation with Narimasa continued on in this way a while longer during which she also scolded him for the unevenness of the pathway leading to his house, causing many of the ladies to stumble. When she returned to the side of Empress Teishi the Empress asked.

“What has happened? Narimasa seemed terribly put out.”

10. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, 6.

11. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, 7.

“‘Oh no,’ Sei Shōnagon answered. ‘I was only telling him how our carriage could not get in.’”¹²

Sei Shōnagon spent the night in a room shared with several younger ladies-in-waiting. Due to their exhaustion the ladies did not notice that the clasp of the room’s sliding door was missing. While they dozed Narimasa approached and pushed the door open.

“May I presume to come in?” Narimasa asked several times.

Sei Shōnagon awoke one of the younger ladies. “Look who is there! What an unlikely sight!” she exclaimed. The other ladies found the situation amusing and laughed. “Who are you?” Sei Shōnagon continued. “Don’t try to hide!”

“‘Oh no,’” he replied. ‘It’s simply that the master of the house has something to discuss with the lady-in-waiting in charge.’”

“‘It was your gate I was speaking about,’ Sei Shōnagon replied. ‘I don’t remember asking you to open the sliding-door.’”

“‘Yes indeed,’ he answered. ‘It is precisely the matter of the gate that I wanted to discuss with you. May I not presume to come in for a moment?’”

“‘Really!’ said one of the young women. ‘How unpleasant! No, he certainly cannot come in.’”¹³

12. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, 7.

13. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, 8.

Hearing that other ladies were present, Narimasa closed the door and left. Sei Shōnagon and the other ladies could not control their laughter.

From this episode we can learn a great deal about Sei Shōnagon's concept of feminine propriety. Beginning with the ladies' entrance to Narimasa's house it is clear that Sei Shōnagon was particularly vexed by being viewed by men while in a state of disarray. [The topic of viewership will be taken up in greater detail in Chapter IV.] Following that, Sei Shōnagon's interactions with Narimasa were highly gendered and marked by status. Sei Shōnagon criticised Narimasa for the shortcomings of his gate with her reference to Yu Ting-kuo. Narimasa replied in a conciliatory manner, praising Sei Shōnagon for her vast knowledge with her use of allusions that he was fortunate to comprehend. Later when Narimasa approached Sei Shōnagon's sleeping quarters she understood his infringement upon her privacy to be a sexual act. Sei Shōnagon surmised that under ordinary circumstances he would never have opened the door to a lady's sleeping quarters and that therefore he must be feeling entitled to take liberties on account of having had the honor of housing the Empress. When he learned that other ladies shared her room he became embarrassed and left. When Sei Shōnagon later reported the event to Empress Teishi, the Empress suggested that Sei Shōnagon's earlier conversation regarding the gate must have roused Narimasa's interest. Evidently not deterred by the ridicule of Sei Shōnagon and the other ladies, Narimasa continued to contact her, telling her that he had informed his brother the Middle Counsellor of her clever remark regarding the gate and that his brother also wished to meet with her.¹⁴

14. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, 7-9.

It is not clear from her account that Sei Shōnagon intended to pursue relations with Narimasa, though based on the comments of Empress Teishi it would seem that Narimasa was sincerely interested in Sei Shōnagon. Perhaps Sei Shōnagon interpreted his behavior as being too sincere; she expressed concern that he might speak openly of his nocturnal visit to her room. As with the gate incident, feminine propriety was foremost in Sei Shōnagon's mind. She neither wanted to be stared at by male courtiers while not looking her best nor did she wish for rumors to be spread regarding Narimasa's visitation. According to Sei Shōnagon's representation of the event, Narimasa took a romantic interest in her because of her clever comment regarding his gate. It seems possible that Sei Shōnagon may have been particularly attractive because not only was she in a position of relative authority over the Empress's other ladies but she was also quick-witted and knowledgeable, traits that would have made her an ideal liaison for men hoping to gain favors from Empress Teishi. Sei Shōnagon clearly sees herself as superior to Narimasa and rather than being receptive to his interests she openly ridiculed him. Nor did she appear terribly interested in having a private meeting with Narimasa's brother. This incident can help provide a complex image of the lives of ladies-in-waiting, illustrating instances of potentially conflicting themes with regard to gender relations. Though they did depend upon male patrons for economic support, women like Sei Shōnagon were evidently well-positioned enough to be selective about with whom they made alliances and in the instance of Narimasa it appears that Sei Shōnagon possessed the upper hand.

Further investigation of *Makura no Sōshi* adds an additional dimension of complication to Sei Shōnagon's view of proper feminine behavior. While some of the

comments regarding the relations between men and women appear in contrast with Sei Shōnagon's attitude toward Narimasa, her writings firmly delineate between appropriate behavior for men and what is preferable for women. Speaking specifically of the qualities of women, in her list of "different ways of speaking" Sei Shōnagon mentions not only commoners and priests, but also men and women.¹⁵ Likewise, she included many injunctions regarding her opinion on feminine behavior. Of particular interest is her comment on the residences of ladies who have no supporting male patron. Sei Shōnagon insists that such women should not appear as though they can take care of the upkeep of their residences. Instead Sei Shōnagon states that their gardens should be filled with weeds and the building in a state of dereliction. She also comments that women in such situations should not try to upkeep their residences themselves and also that they should not keep their gates closed. Sei Shōnagon does not expound upon her comment about closed gates, but I surmise that she meant that since women who lacked the support of men should make a point of appearing in a state of desolation, it would not do to hide the decay of their residences or the growth of weeds in their gardens by keeping their gates closed.

Regarding relationships with men, Sei Shōnagon expounds upon the complications that can result when these relations become too visible. When receiving visits from a male lover while taking a leave from court she explains that it is better to stay in the residence of one's parents. This relates to notions of propriety that a woman must observe when expecting visits from a lover and where staying with anyone other

15. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, 5.

than one's parents necessarily results in too much attention from the household servants. Sei Shōnagon also describes the complicated ways in which ladies-in-waiting in the imperial court communicated their presence from behind blinds to the men who came to visit them. Sei Shōnagon notes that she has a strong sense of being watched while in the quarters of these ladies and her description of their careful interactions with male visitors exemplifies this. Whereas speaking aloud would communicate her actions more obviously, a lady-in-waiting could convey her presence to a man simply through the rustle of her many-layered silken skirts.

She notes that it is distasteful for women to exhibit jealousy when their husbands visit other ladies, particularly if the wife is older than her husband. Moreover in her list of “things that have lost their power” Sei Shōnagon includes jealous wives who attempt to gain the attention of their husbands by absconding from home. Sei Shōnagon claims that this only results in the wife returning home after her husband has displayed a lack of regard for her behavior.¹⁶ While much of Sei Shōnagon's writings could be construed as literary gossip, she nevertheless derides this past time as shameful. The physical construction of walls was such that conversations could easily be overheard. Sei Shōnagon disapproves of both the shamelessness of the slander as well as the noise caused by such behavior.¹⁷

16. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, 132.

17. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, 131.

Murasaki Shikibu

I now turn to a comparison of the construction of female gender in the diary of Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部. A contemporary of Sei Shōnagon, Murasaki Shikibu served as lady-in-waiting to Empress Shōshi and her diary likewise contains many details about lives and habits of women of her class. Although her descriptions do not carry the same attitude of ridicule and rancor as some of Sei Shōnagon's, Murasaki nevertheless clearly distinguishes the admirable from the objectionable, all the while showing a self-consciousness regarding others' opinions of her own presentation.

Murasaki's discussions of her fellow ladies often center on their beauty—both physical and temperamental. For instance, Murasaki compares the sleeping lady Ben Saishō to a princess, so beautiful is her form. At the ceremony following the birth of a prince, Murasaki praises the good taste of Ben-no-Naishi, having chosen to wear a train with cranes and pine trees, symbolic of long life. Murasaki admires the appearance of the same lady on another occasion, comparing her to an ancient dream maiden, her appearance surpassing the other ladies. Of the lady Kōshōshō, Murasaki states that she and the others envy her for her elegance. However, Miya-no-Naishi receives extremely high praise, her youthfulness, natural charms and lack of vanity serving as an example that Murasaki believes others should emulate. Though social graces may have come easily to Miya-no-Naishi, Murasaki's list of necessary traits in a woman—prudence, wit,

charm, and right-mindedness—leave the impression that a great many women may have found it a difficult challenge to meet.¹⁸

Of course, few people are without faults, as Murasaki notes, and all ladies-in-waiting are subject to close scrutiny. Interestingly, Murasaki remarks that only those ladies who are able to hide their faults even while alone can truly hope to avoid criticism. Murasaki herself is not immune: early one morning before having had a chance to powder her face, the Empress's father Fujiwara no Michinaga approaches her, demanding a poem. Her frantic attempt to hide her unpowdered face attests to the potency of the Heian value of a woman's appearance. Even when first rising from sleep a woman must look beautiful. During the frightening time of Empress Shōshi's labor¹⁹, Murasaki observes the sorry state of Kochūjo's face, her makeup ruined from crying. Seeing the usually beautiful lady in a state of disarray, Murasaki fears for what her own face must look like.²⁰ Murasaki herself was also subject to the injunctions on proper feminine composure, desiring to conform to accepted notions of femininity even as she expressed her own view of what constituted ideal feminine behavior.

While recounting the less desirable attributes of other ladies, Murasaki rebukes herself for her actions, fearing that she will be criticized for her gossip. Nevertheless, she continues with pointing out others' shortcomings, exploiting rivalries among women to separate the respectable from the more unseemly. Of several ladies, such as Kodaibu,

18. Murasaki Shikibu, Richard John Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu, Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs: A Translation and Study* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 67, 117-123.

19. Birth in general was quite dangerous during the Heian period and the arrival of Prince Atuhira was a particularly turbulent event.

20. Murasaki Shikibu, *Murasaki Shikibu*, 45, 55.

Murasaki comments on how their long hair grows thin at the ends, a major personal fault. Murasaki admits that Izumi Shikibu, is a skilled writer, yet harshly condemns her for her romantic liaisons. Therefore with Izumi we see an instance of how being too successful at winning the favor of male courtiers could bring the censure of other ladies-in-waiting. As is addressed below, Izumi was aware of these criticisms and attempted to ameliorate the state of her reputation. No woman received as harsh a judgment as Sei Shōnagon, who Murasaki saw as being highly conceited and lacking in self-restraint. At the same time she also criticizes Sei Shōnagon for brazenly showing off her Chinese writings.²¹ In this way it appears that the traits for which Sei Shōnagon prided herself and which may have led to her drawing the interest of male courtiers such as Narimasa and his brother, could also rouse the contempt of other women. Perhaps like Izumi, Sei Shōnagon's overt display of wit and talent threatened the well-being of her peers. It is also very interesting that even as she mocked the social blunders of others, Sei Shōnagon herself was the subject of rather harsh gossip. In such an environment, a woman would naturally take great care when presenting herself to others, whether in writing or in person.

Izumi Shikibu

Murasaki's reaction to Izumi Shikibu's 和泉式部 excessive relations with men indicates a sense that women should not be overly active in their pursuit of relations and should instead maintain an aesthetic of passivity. Izumi's story unfolds with the Prince beginning his courtship of the heroine. It is important to note that the character "woman" (generally regarded as representing Izumi herself) does not make the first move, thereby

21. Murasaki Shikibu, *Murasaki Shikibu*, 119, 120, 131-133.

remaining idyllically passive. Furthermore, Izumi gives great priority to emphasizing the loneliness of the woman, a theme that reappears in the diaries of ladies such as Michitsuna no Haha and Sarashina as is discussed later. This is also reminiscent of Sei Shōnagon's comments regarding the desolate nature of the residence of woman who lives alone. Izumi seems to have recognized that underscoring her state of material need could only help her reputation in the eyes of her peers. Regardless of what the Prince's intentions for her might be, the heroine of the tale simply replies to him out of want for human contact. Additionally, Izumi works to give the impression that this is truly a prudent and respectable woman; despite the many attempts of the Prince to persuade her to meet him she cautiously resists. Such is her resolve that had the Prince not determined to force his way into her chambers, they would never have met in person at all.²²

Izumi's heroine displays other virtues as well. The woman of Izumi's tale prays to Buddha out of her deep sadness. As is shown later, an emphasis upon piety is also found in Sarashina's diary. When gossip begins to spread concerning the heroine and the Prince, the woman is highly humiliated, as reflected in Murasaki's scathing disapproval of Izumi.²³ She had reason to fear that others would think she was seeking material gain from her liaison, when in truth she only wished to be loved and respected. This comment is particularly telling given our understanding that a number of women of the lady-in-waiting class actually did rely upon wealthy male courtiers for their material well-being. As we have seen in the above examples, a reputation of too aggressively pursuing

22. Izumi Shikibu, and Edwin A. Cranston, *The Izumi Shikibu Diary: A Romance of the Heian Court* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969), 134-139.

23. Murasaki Shikibu, *Murasaki Shikibu*, 131.

material support could turn a woman into a social pariah in the eyes of her peers. Finally, after spending more time with him the Prince eventually recognizes her faithfulness.²⁴ Despite the harsh rumors about her colorful love-life, she portrays herself as being entirely devoted to the Prince.

While establishing the heroine as a woman of prudence, Izumi also invites sympathy for the unfortunate circumstances of her situation. Although she is horribly embarrassed at the attentions of the Prince, knowing that her name will certainly be tarnished by malicious rumors, the woman has little other choice than to submit to his desires. With her husband dead she has no one else to rely on. Consigning herself to the inevitable gossip, she acquiesces to the Prince and takes up residence in his house.²⁵

Hon'in no Jijū

The aesthetic of feminine passivity can also be seen in a collection of poems known to us as *Hon'in no Jijū Shū*. The poems detail the author's affair with the two brothers Kanemichi and Koremasa. Being first the lover of Kanemichi, Hon'in no Jijū depicts herself as forcibly taken by Koremasa, thus presenting herself in the socially acceptable passive feminine role. Yet so as to appear innocent of any ensuing gossip—as is later demonstrated in the example of Michitsuna no Haha—Hon'in no Jijū was careful to describe her attempts to avoid meeting Koremasa, refusing to meet him in person. In fact, it was only through a scheme involving one of her servants that Koremasa was initially able to approach her. Having thus absolved herself of blame, once the

24. Izumi Shikibu, *Izumi Shikibu Diary*. 153-160, 170-171

25. Izumi Shikibu, *Izumi Shikibu Diary*. 170-176.

relationship with Koremasa was established, Hon'in no Jijū demonstrated her new lover's skill as ladies' man, bemoaning how seldom he visits her.²⁶ This kind of response is nearly identical to Michitsuna no Haha's accounts of her princely lover as too occupied with other ladies to give her the attention she desires. Additionally, through her expressions of longing for more frequent visits, Hon'in no Jijū portrayed herself according to a feminine ideal of passive dedication.

Sarashina

Let me now turn to another work, the *Sarashina Nikki*, 更級日記 (Sarashina Diary) so named after a posthumous nickname for its author, (also known as Sugara no Takasue no Musume 菅原孝標女, the daughter of Sugara no Takasue) tells the story of a woman who did not succeed in the social game. Yet even as she bemoans her sad state Sarashina makes some attempt to redeem herself in the eyes of her readers by highlighting what socially desirable traits she did possess as well as attempting to evoke sympathy for her situation. As a girl Sarashina's main drive appears to be her love for romance stories, making a point of collecting such influential titles as Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari*. The emphasis she places on her interest in these tales suggests that she may have been attempting to prove her worth through her literary interests. Furthermore, in her quest for more reading material, Sarashina relates how she was lucky enough to receive notebooks that had been the property of Princess Sanjō, having received them via

26. Hon'in no Jijū, "Collected Poems of Hon'in no Jijū," trans. Joshua S. Mostow, In *At the House of Gathered Leaves: Shorter Biographical and Autobiographical Narratives from Japanese Court Literature*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 124-143.

a cousin.²⁷ There is therefore some evidence that Sarashina was attempting to display her good connections as well. At the same time she also makes a point of showing her readers her skill at appreciating natural beauty and poetry composition.²⁸ It is as though Sarashina was suggesting that though she might not be a social success, she did not lack for poetic skills or sensitivity to natural beauty.

Sarashina devotes a great deal of her diary to descriptions of her personal troubles, representing herself again and again as a victim of her circumstances. Beginning with her statement that reading romance stories was a way for her to escape her own life, Sarashina does much to evoke pity. Early in the diary her nurse gives birth to a child, and though Sarashina hates the idea of abandoning her nurse in this condition, she portrays herself as being hurried along to the capital by her brother, in a sense forced to leave the nurse behind. Later on Sarashina describes herself as being moved by the performance of three talented singers only to be deeply touched by the sadness of their parting. Upon arriving in the capital, Sarashina portrays herself as feeling awkward and unsure as to how to go about finding more reading material. At nearly the same time she also depicts herself suffering the death of her current nurse as well as the Chamberlain Major Counselor.²⁹ Given the trend of other women of her class to value expressions of humility and poverty, it seems very likely that Sarashina would have expected her writings to impart a positive self-image in the minds of her readers.

27. Sugara no Takasue no Musume, *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-Century Japan*, trans. Ivan Morris (New York: Dial Press, 1971), 20, 41, 53.

28. Sugara no Takasue no Musume, *Bridge of Dreams*, 68.

29. Sugara no Takasue no Musume, *Bridge of Dreams*, 20, 43, 48, 53, 54.

Although physical appearance was exceedingly important for one's social status, Sarashina describes herself as being an unattractive girl. It was in this context that she engaged in the politics of writing, hoping for a princely lover like the characters in her romance tales and pinning the realization of her dreams on her father's promotion and her subsequent elevation of status. Disappointingly, however, her father is sent away to a distant province, dashing her hopes of living out the life of a fairy-tale romance. As it turns out, Sarashina remains in an unenviable position, continuing to live at court only because of her nieces and feeling rather like a guest.³⁰

Later in life Sarashina regrets having spent so much time concerned with romance stories instead of religious devotion. She laments her failure to have had more time for religion, which she attributes to the cause of her unhappiness. At this point Sarashina occupies herself with religious pilgrimages, focusing on bringing future happiness to her children and husband. Whereas earlier attempts to produce a positive image of herself relied mainly on her literary skills, toward the end of her diary (and as a more mature person) Sarashina's interests lie in impressing the reader with her devotion to religion. On one occasion Sarashina determines to visit the sacred site of Hase on the Sacred Purification Day. Since most people traveled to the capital (rather than leaving it) for the ceremonies her brother warned her that others would laugh at her. Still, she remains determined, believing that Buddha would give her extra merit for choosing that particular day.³¹ Though she may not have had the social graces and prestige of some of the ladies mentioned above, Sarashina did make a case for herself as a woman who could hold her

30. Sugara no Takasue no Musume, *Bridge of Dreams*, 55-57, 71, 72, 88.

31. Sugara no Takasue no Musume, *Bridge of Dreams*, 85, 87, 88, 98, 99, 112, 119.

own in literary matters. Furthermore, she professed a strong interest in the futures of her husband and children with her many pilgrimages in a way that is not so different from Michitsuna no Haha's description of her own dedication to her husband.

Michitsuna no Haha

Much like *Sarashina Nikki*, *Kagerō Nikki* 蜻蛉日記, (Gossamer Diary) gives great attention to the personal shortcomings and misery of the author. Like *Sarashina*, the author of —*Kagerō Nikki*, Michitsuna no Haha 道綱母, (the mother of Michitsuna)—is very much aware of the ideal of having an exalted male lover. But whereas *Sarashina* could only dream, Michitsuna no Haha managed to secure the princely Kaneie as her husband. Through her writing Michitsuna no Haha not only suggests her own conformity to the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice and passivity, she also portrays her husband in the light of a successful man, being both a lady's man and a high-ranking statesman.³² By writing she exercised the power to articulate feminine gender roles and their accompanying significance. Because of differences in status Michitsuna no Haha is only a lesser wife and does not command the full attention of the prince, a point of grief throughout the narrative.³³ However, Michitsuna no Haha's continual referencing to Kaneie's exalted status and success at courting other women also carries a note of pride. Though she might be miserable at only hearing from her prince on rare occasions, her descriptions of his splendor and the longing she feels for him portray him every bit as the

32. Michitsuna no Haha, and Sonja Arntzen, *The Kagerō Diary: A Woman's Autobiographical Text from Tenth-Century Japan* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997), 57-59, 69-73, 143-145.

33. Michitsuna no Haha, *Kagerō Diary*, 115, 283.

kind of fairy-tale lover for whom girls such as Sarashina might have dreamed. Even when she unfavorably compares her own shabby appearance to that of her husband, Michitsuna no Haha takes care to mention how she can scarcely believe that the beautiful clothes adorning her husband are the product of her own hand, an indirect compliment of her own skills, spoken with a pretense of humility.³⁴ One can imagine that had a woman like Sarashina read *Kagerō Nikki*, she may very well have desired to have Kaneie for herself. In this way Michitsuna no Haha was cleverly using the status of her husband to boost her own standing in the eyes of her peers.

Despite the many lamentations of the author of *Kagerō Nikki*, her husband Kaneie never completely abandoned her and continued even to display jealousy toward other men who received her attentions. This is clearly illustrated toward the end of the narrative when a man begins to frequent Michitsuna no Haha's residence in order to court her adopted daughter. Michitsuna no Haha is very much aware that the man's frequent visits will inevitably cause rumors to spread surrounding her own romantic involvement and that Kaneie may grow jealous. True to her suspicions, Kaneie does indeed admit pangs of jealousy toward the suitor, going so far as to send her a letter remarking on the attention she was giving to the suitor and the possibility that it might lead to gossip.³⁵ Yet taking this event in her narrative into context, it would appear that she actually had something to gain by proving that even at this late point in her life she could command the jealousy of her princely lover, who even still wanted her all to himself.

34. Michitsuna no Haha, *Kagerō Diary*, 319-323.

35. Michitsuna no Haha, *Kagerō Diary*, 337-357.

Furthermore, the great fear she has that her prince will abandon her completely could also be interpreted as a way of conveying her affection for him, in effect expressing womanly devotion to her husband, rather than brimming with jealousy. Just as she continues to produce beautiful clothing for her husband, so too does she in general portray herself in a modest light, doing what she can to live up to the ideal of womanhood. Additionally like the ladies mentioned above she does not hesitate to criticize other mid-ranking women for their shortcomings. For instance, the chance meeting with a former rival illustrates a sense of competition, as Michitsuna no Haha laughs at the anger the lady must feel toward her during an exchange of poetry. Additionally, while out in her carriage Michitsuna no Haha catches sight of some commoners. Much as Sei Shōnagon ridicules the ladies who are unaware of their improperly powdered faces, Michitsuna no Haha comments on how the beggars seem completely oblivious to their disagreeable appearances.³⁶

Michitsuna no Haha's rendition of her relationship with Kaneie bears certain similarities to the injunctions regarding womanly etiquette offered by other women of the lady-in-waiting class, suggesting that these characteristics may have been more than personal idiosyncrasies of any one of the women. The commonalities hint at some of the myriad ways in which women of the mid-ranking class constructed the concept of the feminine in the context of the political and social developments in the late Heian period, including waning levels of income associated with the position of lady-in-waiting. From Murasaki's writings we can gain an understanding of how she may have viewed the

36. Michitsuna no Haha, *Kagerō Diary*, 133, 159.

position of women of her class at court. As with the writings of Sei Shōnagon there is a strong emphasis upon the evaluation of women for their ability to conform to a certain notion of beauty and to exhibit certain social graces. The similarities between the writings of Murasaki and Sei Shōnagon indicate that Sei Shōnagon was not alone in her concern for the power of gossip. Like Sei Shōnagon, Murasaki both participated in gossip as a medium for policing the behavior of her peers and acknowledged the potential for gossip to disrupt the social harmony. Therefore in Murasaki's writings we see one half of the two-fold nature of politics among ladies-in-waiting with the pressure of gossip pushing woman toward a kind of normalcy verging on conformity, as noted by Fukutō Sanae.³⁷

I believe that the kind of conformist beauty described by Murasaki can be understood as an outcome of the tension between the efforts of "single"³⁸ women to attract male patrons and also to avoid drawing unwanted attention from their peers. Through the policing power of gossip, ladies-in-waiting agreed upon a standard of feminine etiquette and derided those who strayed outside this ideal. Therefore, women who failed to live up to this ideal risked not only the criticism of their peers, who were eager to assert their superiority, but also may have been less successful in gaining the attention of potential male patrons, as seen in Prince Genji's selection of female love interests and his subsequent financial support. As noted in the Introduction, many women

37. Fukutō Sanae, *Heianchō no onna to otoko*, 300.

38. Michitsuna no Haha provides a counter-example as she was in a more permanent relationship with Kaneie. However, as is discussed below, her attitude toward feminine beauty and etiquette did not differ greatly from those ladies who lacked such attachments. One theme that emerges from her diary is the fear that her husband Kaneie will abandon her in favor of other women. Given the ease with which such relations could be terminated (particularly when the man held significantly higher rank than the woman) I think that Michitsuna no Haha can be seen as belonging to the same category of mid-ranking women as Murasaki.

of the lady-in-waiting class relied upon liaisons formed with wealthy male courtiers for material support. From this chapter we can see the intentional responses of women who were faced with the economic reality of needing to secure a patron-client relationship with a wealthy male aristocrat, specifically in terms of how notions of gender may have been shaped by this environment. As the writings of these women reveal, competition for economic support resulted in a feminine aesthetic of conformity wherein gossip or fear of material deprivation encouraged adherence to the norm. By examining the individual writings of these women we can see examples of how they navigated these two undesirable extremes while articulating their own understanding of gendered identity. The following chapter expounds upon this theme through an examination of the late-Heian construction of the gendered identity of women at the highest levels of court society.

CHAPTER III

GENDERED AUTHORITY OF ELITE WOMEN

Though only thirty-nine and still possessed of her youthful beauty, Senior Grand Empress Shōshi had made up her mind to become a lay nun in preparation for the afterlife. Although child mortality was high and pregnancy extremely dangerous, Shōshi had prevailed in giving birth to two emperors, thereby allowing her father Michinaga to hold a monopoly over political matters at court, and the splendor of her tonsure indicated her significance. The mother of two emperors and the ranking equivalent of a retired emperor, Shōshi represented the pinnacle of her parents' hopes and dreams. Therefore, no detail in the ceremony had been overlooked. Shades of green, yellow, and brown echoed throughout her folding screens, curtains, and sandalwood-framed dais. Dark yellow Chinese damask formed the facing on her screens while green Chinese brocade traced the borders. The screens' wooden frames glistened with gold lacquer designs. Olive-brown bombycine decorated their back sides. The dark yellow of Shōshi's stand curtains followed this analogous color scheme as did the olive-brown of her draperies. Buddhist texts covered her cabinets in gold lacquer, creating a religious atmosphere. Her furnishings reflected the importance of the occasion.¹

1. Helen Craig McCullough, and William H. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* (Stanford, Calif: Univ. Pr, 1980), 712, 713.

Shōshi's cousin, the Mii Bishop Eien was to perform the tonsure. Shōshi's brother Yorimichi moved to hand the scissors to Eien, but overcome with grief he suddenly began sobbing. His father, Michinaga, attempted to assuage his sorrow.²

“Shōshi's luck in our world has been all that anyone could ask. This happy event will put my mind at rest about her future life,”³ Michinaga told his son.

However, once they saw Shōshi's shortened hair, Michinaga and the rest of the family could not suppress their tears. While it was previously a foot longer than her own height, Shōshi's hair now rested just at her shoulders. After Shōshi had finished with her religious vows a messenger arrived bearing an Imperial Decree granting her an increase in rank. Now the equal of a retired emperor, Shōshi held the title of Imperial Lady (Jōtōmon'in) and would be in control of her own Household of Retired Imperial Personage.⁴ While Michinaga is celebrated as the most influential courtier of his day, it is important to note—particularly with regard to Heian customs of marriage and family dynamics—that he was surrounded by a number of politically important women. Michinaga's position at court was as much a reflection of the success of these women as their stations were of his. In this chapter I attempt to offer a way of conceptualizing the relationship between Michinaga and these influential women while also attempting to explain why such important female figures would be overlooked by modern scholars.

2. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 713, 714.

3. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 714.

4. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 713, 714.

As the preeminent courtier of the Heian period, Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1028) has received a sizable amount of scholarly attention. Yet despite the above example, scholarship on women's contributions to Michinaga's rise to power is somewhat lacking, specifically with regards to how women functioned in the family dynamics of Heian court politics. While sources from the time are quick to celebrate the achievements of Michinaga, they also hint at the powerful role played by the women who surrounded him.

In his article "Oligarchy, Shared Rulership, and Power Blocs" Mikael Adolphson addresses the ways by which courtiers such as Michinaga came to power. In describing the Fujiwara's method of ensuring power, Adolphson stresses the significance of government privatization and clan-based control. For instance, although many Fujiwara gained influence by becoming regents of reigning emperors, Fujiwara no Michinaga held sway at court without such a title, much like the powerful women of the age. Instead, Michinaga's political prowess emerged as a result of successful marriage politics, the Heian practice of matrilocality granting Fujiwara grandfathers great control over infant emperors.⁵

In their article "From Female Sovereign to Mother of the Nation" Fukutō Sanae and Takeshi Watanabe provide a discussion of the ways in which mothers of the Emperor gained great influence during the Heian period. This article illustrates the ways in which powerful women such as Senshi and Shōshi functioned as authority figures despite no longer being eligible for the position of sovereign. For instance, they cite the ability of

5. Mikael Adolphson, "Oligarchy, Shared Rulership, and Power Blocs," in *Japan Emerging: Premodern History to 1850*, ed. Karl Friday (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2012), 124, 125.

these two women to determine consorts for the Emperor (subsequently affecting the political position of an entire family) as well as to affect general court appointments.⁶ In this chapter I address the themes of gender construction for the women who occupied these emerging positions of authority by building upon the existing scholarship on the role of elite women in the Heian court and by examining the lives of three women who were instrumental to Michinaga's rise to power. My main sources are two chronicles of Heian court life commissioned to celebrate the achievements of Michinaga. *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* (*Eiga Monogatari* 栄花物語) is thought to have been compiled by Akazome Emon, a lady-in-waiting to Michinaga's wife Rinshi. Derived from such sources as the diaries of other ladies-in-waiting, this source is particularly rich in emotional and visual detail. *Ōkagami* is believed to be the work of the courtiers Fujiwara no Tamenari, and Fujiwara no Yoshinobu. In contrast to *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, *Ōkagami* 大鏡 is less vivid in its descriptions of court life; however, it provides much information on the family politics of the day.

Ōkagami holds up the example of Empress Anshi (927–964), Empress to Emperor Murakami, as a paragon of feminine virtue and as shown below, similarities can be drawn between the representation of her authority and that of the three women addressed in this chapter. In particular, we see that authority is connected to a perception of selflessness on the part of the women. When she learns the Emperor is attracted to her sister, Anshi is applauded for her lack of jealousy in arranging their meeting. Interestingly, however,

6. Sanae Fukutō and Takeshi Watanabe, "From Female Sovereign to Mother of the Nation: Women and Government in the Heian Period," in *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries*, ed. Mikael Adolphson, Edward Kamens, and Stacie Matsumoto (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 29-32.

Tale of Flowering Fortunes adds to this narrative by describing Anshi's righteous indignation when she heard that the Emperor's frequent visits to her sister were the source of gossip. As a result of her anger the Emperor cut off relations with her sister. Anshi's authority to curtail the actions of the Emperor is justified by her earlier display of selflessness and it is the Emperor who is to blame. Yet, Anshi's very ability and willingness to act against the Emperor's interests suggest that she was not actually as selfless as the sources claim her to be. An examination of three important women in the life of Michinaga reveals a similar theme of feminine authority as being connected to selflessness.

The first of the three women to be addressed is Michinaga's older sister Senshi. As Empress she was able to advocate for her younger brother's interests at court. The second, Michinaga's wife Rinshi, provided him with several daughters who rose to the position of Empress. The third, Shōshi, the oldest of these daughters secured Michinaga's monopolization of the position of Regent to the Emperor. These women were central to the development of the political life of Michinaga, and this chapter explores the new ways in which femininity was articulated for women in these social positions.

Senshi

The Emperor, who may have felt beleaguered, stopped visiting his mother, who then proceeded to take possession of one of the Imperial Apartments. Instead of asking him to call, she invaded the Bedchamber, armed with a new store of tearful expostulations, while Michinaga waited in the room she had left. After an interval long enough to excite painful

*misgivings, she opened the door and came out, wearing a triumphant smile on her flushed, tear-stained face. 'At last! The decree has been issued!' she told him. Even the most trivial happenings result from the karma of a previous life, so I need hardly say that such an important event did not come about through the good offices of a single individual. Yet how could Michinaga fail to feel gratitude toward Senshi! He more than repaid the favor, and it was he who carried her ashes to the burial ground after her cremation.*⁷

Fujiwara no Senshi 藤原 詮子 (962-1001) was the second daughter of Chancellor Kaneie. Her full siblings included the men Michitaka, Michikane, and Michinaga. In 978 she became Junior Consort to Emperor En'yū. In 980 she gave birth to the future emperor Ichijō and was promoted to the rank of Grand Empress when he ascended the throne in 986. In 991 she became a nun, and was subsequently granted the title of Higashisanjōin Imperial Lady 東三条院, thereby being of equal rank to a Retired Emperor. She was the first to receive such a rank but would not be the last as her niece Shōshi would follow her example many years later.⁸

As the above excerpt from *Ōkagami* illustrates, Senshi was an advocate for the interests of her younger brother Michinaga. She used her influence over her son, the Emperor Ichijō, to give Michinaga the role of document inspector, thereby greatly

7. Helen Craig McCullough, Tamenari Fujiwara, and Yoshinobu Fujiwara, *Okagami, the Great Mirror: Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1027) and His Times : a Study and Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 198, 199.

8. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 277, 278.

increasing his influence at court. In this first section I explore the court life of Senshi and articulate how her connection to Michinaga's success can be seen as an example of women's role in the political objectives of aristocratic families of the Heian court. It is significant that Senshi's authority in these texts is almost invariably couched in terms of her assistance to Michinaga and as such Senshi is portrayed as a protective older sister rather than as an individual acting in her own interests. I believe that this portrayal of Senshi's role at court can be seen as an expression of the masculinization of the position of emperor, resulting in the association of women's authority with their male relatives.⁹ It is important to remember however, that the conceptualization of female authority as presented in these texts was filtered through the prism of the Heian court climate and cannot be taken at face value.¹⁰ However, while women like Senshi may have acted more out of self-interest than was readily apparent these texts can give an understanding of the discourse surrounding the gendered role of such women.

Senshi's court life began in 978 when her father Kaneie made the decision to present her as a Junior Consort to Emperor En'yū. Kaneie's brothers had refrained from presenting their daughters at court for fear of upsetting the current Empress Kōshi, since additional imperial consorts posed a potential threat to Kōshi's position as mother of a future emperor. As it turned out, Kaneie's decision to present his daughter proved to be a

9. Fukutō Sanae and Takeshi Watanabe call attention to the problematic tendency of regarding female sovereigns as mere place holders for male emperors even before this shift to male imperial succession in the late eighth century. They further argue that even after this shift certain female figures maintained an influential role at court. My interest is in investigating the significance of this female influence despite the institutionalization of male heirs as the only viable imperial successors.

10. While it should come as no surprise that court politics would impact representations of gendered authority I believe it is important to recognize the distinction between the discourse on female authority and the influence that women might have actually held.

success as En'yū quickly grew to like the charming and attractive Senshi. As can be imagined, having his sister become the Emperor's favorite was a great encouragement to the aspiring young Michinaga.¹¹

As the years passed Senshi continued to have success as the Emperor's favorite. In the year 979 Empress Kōshi died and Senshi's uncle, the Regent Yoritada, presented his daughter Junshi at court, meaning that both Senshi and Junshi held the position of Junior Consort with the potential for bearing a future emperor and appointment to the rank of empress. While Junior Consorts were supported solely by their families, imperial rank granted a woman additional income. However, Senshi remained En'yū's favorite, despite the fact that Junshi's father held the enviable position of Regent while Senshi's father was only Chancellor.¹² As luck would have it, Senshi soon became pregnant and in 980 safely gave birth to En'yū's son, thereby giving her a chance at becoming the future mother to an Emperor. Senshi's future prospects appeared bright as Junshi never became pregnant and a third consort of the Emperor quickly fell out of favor when her arrival at court coincided with the unfortunate event of the palace catching fire.¹³

Being the mother of the Emperor's only son, Senshi was very displeased when she learned of the Emperor's decision to promote Junshi to the rank of Empress. Despite En'yū's feelings for Senshi, he could not ignore the fact that Junshi's father was

11. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 116.

12. The fathers therefore also being significant political rivals.

13. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 117-119.

Regent.¹⁴ An exchange between Senshi's family and Junshi's brother, Lord Kintō, illustrates the humiliation Senshi and her relatives suffered as a result of her lack of promotion. Additionally, this passage highlights the significance for men of having a sister elevated to the rank of Empress.

When his younger sister, Junshi, first entered the Palace after having been elevated to Imperial rank, she passed the Higashisanjō Mansion on her way along the Tōin Avenue. Of course, Kaneie and Senshi were both in a state of unutterable chagrin. Elated at being the older brother of an Empress, Kintō pulled up his horse, looked into the mansion's grounds and said, 'I wonder when the consort in there will receive Imperial rank.' Kaneie and the rest of the family were outraged, but they consoled themselves with the thought that Senshi was the mother of a Prince.¹⁵

While Senshi's family may have been disappointed with Senshi's lack of elevation in status, the fact that she alone had produced a son ensured that she would eventually have Imperial rank. Additionally, as the mother of the only heir of En'yū, Senshi was in a unique position to influence the Emperor. Because Imperial children were customarily raised with their mother's family, En'yū was dependent upon the goodwill of Senshi to spend time with his heir while deeply regretting not giving Senshi

14. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 120.

15. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 113.

the title of Empress. Furthermore, Senshi received rewards of ranks and offices from En'yū when she commissioned prayers to ensure the succession of their son.¹⁶

As it happened, Senshi and her family did not have to wait long for her promotion to Empress and later Grand Empress. Wanting to secure the future of his son (the future Emperor Ichijō) as crown prince, Emperor En'yū was quick to abdicate in 984. This abdication made the former Crown Prince the new Emperor and allowed En'yū to name his son as the next Crown Prince. En'yū's successor, Emperor Kazan,¹⁷ happened to suffer the death of a favorite consort and retired to a life of monkhood in his early years. Therefore, Senshi's son became Emperor Ichijō in 986 at age seven. The mother of a reigning Emperor, Senshi now held the title of Grand Empress and her male family members likewise received promotions. With the ascension of Emperor Ichijō Kaneie was named Regent. Senshi's oldest brother Michitaka became Middle Counselor and Master of her Household, Michikane became a Consultant, and Michinaga, the youngest brother, gained the position of Middle Captain of third rank.¹⁸

An influential woman at court, Senshi was reputed to favor the interests of Michinaga over her brothers Michitaka and Michikane. Being four years older than Michinaga, Senshi apparently regarded him with motherly affection, and as will be seen, Michinaga owed much of his political success to her intervention.¹⁹ Senshi had taken into

16. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 120-124.

17. Kazan was the son of En'yū's brother, the ex-Emperor Reizei. Kazan's mother (Fujiwara no Kaishi) was the daughter of Koretada, an uncle of Michinaga.

18. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 125, 133, 135, 136.

19. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 138.

her household a young woman by the name of Meishi. Many men at court expressed romantic interest in her—including Senshi’s brother Michitaka—but Senshi rebuffed them all. In particular she saw Michitaka as an unreliable lover for her young protégé. However, when Michinaga expressed interest in Meishi, the Grand Empress eagerly arranged their marriage.²⁰

As the years passed Michinaga’s older brother, Michitaka became Regent and Michinaga developed a keen rivalry with his brother’s son, Korechika. Since his father was Regent, Korechika had managed to secure the position of minister of state ahead of his uncle Michinaga and appeared destined to be next in line for the Regency. An anecdote relates the competition between Michinaga and Korechika.²¹ One day Michinaga came upon his brother and nephew engaged in archery practice. Making up his mind to challenge Korechika, Michinaga took up a bow and spoke. “If Emperors and Empresses are to issue from my house, let this arrow hit the mark.”²² It was a perfect shot. Michinaga aimed another arrow. “If I am to serve as Regent, let this arrow find the mark.”²³ Again his aim was perfect. According to the story, Korechika found this event greatly intimidating, his hands shaking so that he could not hold the bow steady.²⁴

Despite the anecdote above, Korechika was in fact a formidable rival to Michinaga. Not only did he outrank his uncle, but his sister Teishi was the beloved

20. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 145.

21. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 198.

22. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 197.

23. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 197.

24. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 197.

Empress of Emperor Ichijō. Korechika's connections to Teishi allowed him to influence the views of the Emperor, persuading him not to trust Michinaga and not to favor his mother, the Grand Empress Senshi. When illness took the life of Michitaka, Korechika appeared to have a good chance of being promoted to the role of Regent. However, Senshi did not like her nephew Korechika, and as shown in the first anecdote, Senshi took active steps to force her son to promote Michinaga over his rivals.²⁵

In spite of Senshi's active contribution to Michinaga's political success, there is a relative dearth of scholarship on her life as compared to scholarship devoted to Michinaga. I argue that the Heian discourse on elite femininity has contributed to this trend. As shown above, while the narrative of Senshi's court career leaves no doubt as to her preeminent position, her status and influence is expressed largely in terms of the assistance she provided to her male relatives. I believe this apparent contradiction illustrates the aesthetic of elite female authority which required that Senshi should not appear as overly self-serving.

In addition to literary depictions of feminine authority as deriving from male relatives, visual representations often appear to understate the presence of elite women. Objects used to obscure the view of high ranking women were a mainstay of the Heian court. The avoidance of the public gaze served as an indication of being a woman of high status. Even the ladies-in-waiting of the court seldom appeared exposed to the public view.²⁶ Instead, scenes of these lower-ranking ladies tend to be situated within the

25. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 198.

26. Janet R. Goodwin, *Selling Songs and Smiles The Sex Trade in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 132.

curtained interiors of mansions and palaces. High-ranking women were even more removed from the sight of others. As an example the image depicting the longevity celebration for Senshi only suggests her presence through the existence of closed blinds on the edge of a building. In this image male courtiers appear on the veranda and lower-ranking women cover their faces with their clothing but Grand Empress Senshi herself is hidden. The literal invisibility of elite women compared to their male counterparts has made it easy for scholars to overlook the significance of such women in the family politics of the Heian court. I believe it is important to recognize that, much like the literary representations in *Tale of Flowering Fortunes* that emphasize her devotion to Michinaga as justification for her exercise of authority, the illustrations of such women may have depicted an imagined reality of gender ideals.²⁷

Additionally, Senshi's narrative can tell us a great deal about the emerging relationship between men and women in kinship networks during the late Heian period. In certain ways this relationship resembles the Heian system of property ownership with distinction made between titular ownership of estates and the actual possession of the rights to administration.²⁸ In both instances collaboration between individuals of disparate statuses was essential for political and economic success. As an individual near to the Emperor, Senshi held influence unavailable to her male kin while she herself owed her position to her father's political maneuvering (as opposed to that of her mother). In

27. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 242, 243.

28. Cornelius J. Kiley, "Estate and Property in the Late Heian Period", in *Medieval Japan; Essays in Institutional History*, ed. John Whitney Hall and Jeffrey P. Mass (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) 113; and Peter Nickerson, "The Meaning of Matrilocality. Kinship, Property, and Politics in Mid-Heian", *Monumenta Nipponica* 48, no. 4 (1993): 448-454.

this dynamic, female aristocrats owned the titular authority that allowed their male kin to act in order to benefit politically.

Rinshi

Michinaga's wife Rinshi, the mother of all those children, might still have passed for a girl of twenty. Small and attractively plump, she was a charming figure, quite the equal of her daughter Shōshi as she leaned against an armrest, dressed in innumerable layers of white-lined robes, with the tapering ends of her rich, shining hair trailing to the ends of her mantle. Her attendants gazed at her with happy smiles. She reclined with an air of placid repose, fingering a small string of red sandalwood prayer beads, and unconsciously murmuring Buddha-invocations; and her beauty moved Michinaga to praise. 'Look at her!' He said to the nurse who was holding Kishi. 'What do you think of the mother of these children? She is as young as her daughters! And her hair!' It was pleasant to see him gaze across at his wife, smiling with satisfaction.²⁹

The primary wife of Michinaga, Minamoto no Rinshi 源倫子 (964-1053), was the mother of six children: Yorimichi, Norimichi, Shōshi, Kenshi, Ishi, and Kishi.³⁰ In combination with the six children of Michinaga's wife Meishi, and children by other women, Michinaga had a total of at least fifteen children; moreover, the high survival rate of his children was a great advantage in the practice of marriage politics. Rinshi was the

29. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 263.

30. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 274.

daughter of the Tsuchimikado Minister of the Left, Minamoto no Masanobu. When she was twenty-three years of age Michinaga took an interest in her; however, Masanobu felt opposed to the marriage on the grounds of Michinaga's low rank. Fortunately for Michinaga, Masanobu's wife Bokushi advocated on his behalf and succeeded in convincing her husband to consent to the marriage. The marriage was soon regarded as a success as Rinshi quickly became pregnant, giving birth to Shōshi. Because the infant was female, and therefore a potential future Empress, the birth was an especially joyous affair, followed by a series of celebratory banquets.³¹ As noted below, Shōshi did indeed become Empress. In fact, at one point three of Rinshi's four daughters held the title of Empress at the same time: Senior Grand Empress Shōshi, Grand Empress Kenshi, and Empress Ishi. Having his daughters so well-positioned made Michinaga unrivaled at court, as is stated in the text *Ōkagami*: "We may indeed call Michinaga the supreme ruler of the land, particularly since Empress Seishi's death this spring has left his three daughters as the sole surviving Empresses."³²

Michinaga's influence at court therefore was intimately tied to the reproductive success of his wife, Rinshi. However, Rinshi herself was not a woman of small influence. While her daughter's positions may have made her husband a courtier of unprecedented power, she herself was the equal of the three Empresses in rank and received annual ranks and offices. Additionally, because she was not an Empress she was much freer than her daughters and could travel wherever she wished, observing Buddhist ceremonies and public events as she pleased. Moreover, Rinshi's high status was symbolized by the fact

31. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 141, 142, 144-146.

32. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 191.

that she was always given the privilege of sitting close to the Emperor and other members of the Imperial family whenever she paid them a visit.³³

*“Today, as mother of the three Empresses, the Crown Prince’s Consort, the Regent, and the Palace Minister (to say nothing of her being the grandmother of the Emperor and the Crown Prince), She is certainly the parent of the nation. And it is the same with Michinaga, of course. The two of them must be earthly manifestations of great buddhas or gods.”*³⁴

Because she did not hold imperial rank Rinshi’s situation was different from that of Senshi and Shōshi. As mentioned above, Rinshi’s lack of imperial status exempted her from the strict ritual seclusion required of empresses. Whereas the development of the ineligibility of women of imperial rank to become reigning sovereign may have prompted the division of titular authority and the power to act on that authority, Rinshi’s authority did not derive from any such recent development. Being somewhat more removed from imperial status, Rinshi’s authority was much more securely grounded in her role as family matriarch. In this way the texts give less attention to the justification of her authority via her male relatives and instead speak much more openly about her lofty position. Here we see that the authority of women was tied strongly to their position as members of a family, with the result that women who were more closely associated with the Emperor—and the position that their gender prevented them from obtaining—

33. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 186, 187.

34. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 187.

required more effort to appear as acting in the interests of their male kin rather than furthering their own agendas.

The admiration with which Michinaga regards his wife in the earlier passage epitomizes her own status vis-à-vis his own. It is evident that he found her attractive and charming as a companion and his well-known affection for her is frequently referenced in sources.³⁵ Moreover, we can imagine the knowing attitude of satisfaction and self-accomplishment that Rinshi might have had as she reclined amongst her children, casually fingering her strand of red sandalwood prayer beads. Yet even as the texts proclaim the preeminence of Rinshi, she receives comparably little attention in the narratives in comparison with Senshi and her daughter Shōshi. As the reader can see from the above, Rinshi is almost exclusively discussed in the context of her children. Yet unlike Senshi and her influence over her son the Emperor Ichijō, we do not see a strong example of Rinshi using her role as mother to force political action. Perhaps, as discussed above, her singular role as mother without possessing imperial rank required less explanation as compared to Senshi and Shōshi whose statuses were of a more recent development. Additionally, because Rinshi's authority was less connected to alliances with male kin, it may also have been that the authors of *Ōkagami* and *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*—which take as their focus the accomplishments of Michinaga—may simply have not regarded her actions as relevant as those of Senshi and Shōshi.

35. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 187.

Shōshi

*Empress Shōshi was in the Imperial Apartment, amusing herself by writing out poems to improve her calligraphy. Then about twenty, she seemed even younger, probably because of her tiny figure. She was exceptionally slender—so frail-looking, indeed, that others worried about her and at the risk of seeming to dwell on one topic, I must add that the length of her beautiful jet-black hair exceeded her height by at least two feet. She had magnificent white skin, and her cheeks were as red and plump as the ground-cherries little girls blow into. She was wearing a set of gorgeous red robes and a white float-patterned mantle; and to Michinaga she was a vision of loveliness as she leaned forward over her calligraphy, her hair cascading around her face.*³⁶

Fujiwara no Shōshi 藤原彰子 (988-1074) was the oldest daughter of Michinaga and Rinshi.³⁷ Michinaga's father Kane'ie was particularly overjoyed at the birth of a granddaughter—who could potentially become an empress—and sent his congratulations to the happy couple. The first seven days following her birth, Shōshi's family sponsored elaborate celebratory banquets.³⁸ In the year 999 Shōshi turned twelve years old. After her coming of age ceremony her father began preparations for her presentation as an Imperial Consort. To make a good impression only the most cultured and elegant ladies

36. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 263, 264.

37. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 280.

38. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 145.

were selected for her entourage. Her father also took great pains to ensure that her personal furnishings would be impressive, arranging for numerous exalted poets to compose poetry for her folding screens.³⁹ The above passage describes Michinaga's tender feelings for his oldest daughter, the beloved Empress of Ichijō. She became Junior Consort to Emperor Ichijō in 999 and was elevated to the rank of Empress a year later. Shōshi gained the title of Grand Empress in 1012 and Senior Grand Empress in 1018. Following the example of her aunt Senshi, she took the tonsure and became Jōtōmon'in Imperial Lady 上東門院 in 1026. Her children by Emperor Ichijō included the Princes Atsuhira and Atsunaga, who later became the Emperors Go-Ichijō and Go-Suzaku.

At the time of her entry into court, Shōshi was accompanied by forty ladies-in-waiting, six young girls, and six attendants. Her aunt, the Grand Empress Senshi, aided with the selection of the young girls, ensuring that they would be suitable attendants. Despite her young age, Shōshi carried herself with an air of maturity and grace. The colors of her robes were carefully coordinated and perfumed. Her hair swept behind her as she walked, being five or six inches longer than her own height. Shōshi's ladies-in-waiting were attired in bombycine jackets with trains decorated with traditional wave and shell patterns, tastefully avoiding a fashion faux-pas while still maintaining a distinctive beauty. The Emperor Ichijō was delighted by his newest consort, and loved to visit her in her wing of the palace. The incense of Shōshi's apartments made a favorable impression upon Emperor Ichijō, and he noted that it was different from the incense of most consorts. Clearly Shōshi and her attendants were possessing of great discernment. The Emperor

39. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 217.

enjoyed inspecting even the most inconsequential items in Shōshi's quarters. The elegance of the young consort's comb boxes and writing case reflected the care lavished on her by her father.⁴⁰

Being the unrivaled favorite of Ichijō, Shōshi became Empress only a year after her initial presentation at court. The elevation to Imperial status required that Shōshi temporarily leave court in order to make a second grand entry in her new position. Along with the move, Shōshi also prepared for the occasion by donning mantles made of Chinese damask, a soft and lustrous silk, with designs woven in double-flowering red plum blossoms. Her ladies-in-waiting likewise worked to dress themselves in the latest styles.⁴¹ While I know of no record describing Shōshi's re-entry to court as an Empress, we can imagine that it must have been a very elaborate affair.

The detailed accounts of Shōshi in her youth give a sense of a woman's social position as it related to her life cycle state. As a young Imperial Consort and childless Empress Shōshi was not portrayed as holding any particular authority at court. The visual representation of Shōshi practicing her calligraphy sharply contrasts against the scene of the matronly Rinshi surrounded by children. While both mother and daughter are praised for their beauty Rinshi clearly holds a position of security acknowledged both by her attendants and Michinaga with their admiring gazes. Having secured her position as matriarch Rinshi directs her attentions to the hereafter. Shōshi, however, occupies a far more tenuous position. Despite being named Empress and being the Emperor's favorite,

40. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 218-220.

41. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 221-223.

her physical frailty and childlessness very likely raised doubts about her future position at court. As a girl of thirteen who was evidently not of robust health, her chances of giving birth to a son in the near future must have appeared slim. In fact Shōshi did not have her first child until she had been at court for seven years. As with her aunt Senshi, Shōshi's future prospects could not be secured merely through the favor of the Emperor. Rather, both women rose to authority through the position of motherhood. Having children also facilitated Shōshi's exercise of this authority as it allowed her to become a major political player at court by acting in the interests of her children.

One day after Shōshi had reached the age of twenty, Ichijō caught word that her menstruation had ceased. Shōshi expressed embarrassment when the Emperor visited her to inquire about her health. Concerned, he spoke with Michinaga.⁴²

"Haven't you heard?" he asked Michinaga. "What do you mean?"

Michinaga answered. "Don't you know the Empress isn't her usual self?

Ordinarily she never sleeps; she's a regular night watchman. But

nowadays it takes an extraordinary commotion to rouse her." "I had

noticed that her face seemed thin, but what you say is news to me. She may

*indeed be pregnant," Michinaga said.*⁴³

After consulting with Shōshi's nurse, Michinaga and Ichijō confirmed Shōshi's condition. Although she had been in court for eight years, this was the first indication that Shōshi might someday become the mother of an Emperor. As such, much excitement

42. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 264.

43. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 264, 265.

ensued in anticipation of the birth. Concerned for her daughter's well-being, Rinshi traveled to the palace to look after her.⁴⁴ As the time for Shōshi to give birth drew nearer, she returned home to the Tsuchimikado Mansion where her parents could support her during the birth. The diary of one of her ladies-in-waiting conveys the atmosphere of anxiety as Michinaga spared no expense to ensure the safety of his daughter and grandchild. Much of Murasaki's diary consists of descriptions of the festivities and ceremonies surrounding the birth of Prince Atsuhira. Here we see that even as the birth of an imperial son elevated Shōshi's authority, Michinaga (more so than Rinshi) assumed a visible and ceremonial role in the event.

Murasaki's diary opens with Shōshi in a state of birthing peril. His daughter having returned to his residence for the birth, Michinaga spared no expense in commissioning Buddhist rituals to ensure a safe delivery. The frequency with which Murasaki describes the involvement of Michinaga attests to the significance of reproduction as well as to Michinaga's practice of assuming the parental authority to establish his ceremonial connection to the young prince. While Shōshi made a favorable impression on Emperor Ichijō shortly after her presentation at court, it was not until Shōshi gave birth to sons—future emperors—that Michinaga's continued influence into the future could be assured through his continued relationship to a reigning emperor. Therefore, the assortment of rituals surrounding the birth of the prince can be seen as more than parental concern for a daughter's well-being.⁴⁵

44. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 265.

45. Murasaki Shikibu, Richard John Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu, Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs: A Translation and Study* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 51-65.

A simple black and white wood-block printing illustrates the bathing ceremony following the birth of Shōshi's first son, Prince Atsuhira. It is significant to note that Michinaga carries the infant prince, taking an active role in the ceremony while his daughter Shōshi remains hidden behind her screens. The image was most likely commissioned as a celebration of Michinaga's success at acquiring a potential Emperor for a grandson. The composition of this image highlights the centrality of Michinaga and his connection to Atsuhira. For instance, the horizontal and diagonal lines of the building appear to point toward Michinaga and his grandson. Additionally, an examination of the faces of the other individuals reveals that they too are facing inwardly in the direction of Michinaga.⁴⁶

By contrast, Shōshi occupies a marginal role in this image.⁴⁷ Being a woman of high rank she is required to remain sequestered behind screens and cannot have an active role in the ceremony. Attention is focused upon her father and his involvement with the infant prince while she fades into the background.⁴⁸ While it is possible that Shōshi's seclusion is simply a result of her recovering from giving birth, I believe it is important to consider that there are no illustrations demonstrating Shōshi's connection to her son in the way seen with Michinaga. Moreover, I think it is important to consider that like the literary texts that they accompany, such illustrations are not immune to the effects of gendered discourse.

46. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 276, 277.

47. Custom also prevented Emperor Ichijō from being present and as the child's maternal grandfather Michinaga ultimately controlled the Emperor's access to the young prince.

48. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 276, 277.

The following incident relates how Michinaga rather than Shōshi acted in the more confrontational capacity of reprimanding those who wished the young prince harm. While Atsuhira was still a small child, Michinaga heard rumors that his rival Korechika had requested a man named Akinobu to place a curse upon the young prince. While it is noted that the rumors were probably false, Michinaga was clearly not willing to risk the well-being of his Imperial grandson and therefore summoned Akinobu before him.⁴⁹

*You must not harbor such wicked designs. Prince Atsuhira is young, but the Four Heavenly Kings are certain to protect anyone with his august karma. Curses can't even kill ordinary people like us, so how could they affect a child as blessed by fortune as the Prince? If you and your people have tried anything of the sort, you will be punished by Heaven. There will be no need for me to pass judgment on you.*⁵⁰

Not only did the young Atsuhira survive this episode but Shōshi again became pregnant and gave birth to Prince Atsunaga with little difficulty. This was very good news for Michinaga, as he was now set to become the grandfather of two Emperors, an enviable position.⁵¹ However, the existence of Shōshi's two sons was less than propitious for Atsuyasu, the son of the deceased Empress Teishi. As discussed above, her brother Korechika had been a rival of Michinaga and with the birth of Shōshi's sons, Teishi's son had no chance of ascending the throne, despite his seniority. Another contender for the

49. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 298.

50. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 298.

51. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 298, 299.

throne was Crown Prince Kochijoin.⁵² Upon hearing a rumor that Michinaga and Shōshi wanted Atsunaga to hold his title he relinquished his place in the Imperial succession, thinking that it was “better to resign than to be deposed.”⁵³ Here we see that Shōshi and Michinaga worked together to secure the future of her children.

I would argue that this kind of cooperation among individuals of disparate statuses—in this instance a woman of imperial rank and her non-imperial father—followed a common pattern in the Heian practice of the separation of titular ownership of authority and its administration.⁵⁴ Therefore, it was Michinaga rather than Shōshi who took charge of the task of apprehending threats to Shōshi’s children and while she was certainly invested in her sons’ futures, her influence is spread via rumor⁵⁵ rather than by summoning and reprimanding a rival. I believe that this can in part be seen as a difference between the conception of male and female gender roles, with women maintaining an appearance of being less directly involved in the affairs of court, at least to the point of allowing their male relatives to act in their stead for certain situations. By “appearance” I mean to suggest that by no means were these women actually removed from court politics and I would suggest that a certain feminine aesthetic of seclusion could in part explain how they could have the appearance of being uninvolved despite the fact that they were physically and socially at the center of the court.

52. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 118, 119.

53. McCullough, *Ōkagami*, 120.

54. Kiley, “Estate and Property;” and Nickerson, “Meaning of Matrilocality.”

55. Though as we see this was also the case for Michinaga. Still, the lack of recorded instances of Shōshi using her position as Empress to advocate more directly for her children without the assistance of Michinaga suggests that Shōshi and Michinaga each held very different roles in the way of pushing for their family’s interests at court.

As an example, the following excerpt from the *Diary Murasaki Shikibu* illustrates how as a result of her position as mother imperial children Shōshi was at the center of court politics.

“They keep very much to themselves. Whenever I have visited them, for it is a place famous for beautiful moonlit nights, marvelous dawn skies, cherries, and the song of the wood thrush, the High Priestess has always seemed most sensitive. The place has an aura of seclusion and mystery about it, and they have very little to distract them. Rarely are they ever in the rush we are whenever Her Majesty visits the Emperor or His Excellency decides to come and stay the night. Indeed, the place naturally lends itself to poetry. Amid such perfect elegance, how could one possibly fail to produce anything but excellent poems? What if a decrepit old fossil like myself were to take service with the High Priestess, and say I met a man I did not know and exchanged poems with him; I am certain I would be able to relax, automatically absorbing much of the elegance of the place, secure in the knowledge that no one would give me a bad name. And if one of our young women, who have nothing to be ashamed of either in terms of beauty or age, were to take it into her head to act the gracious lady and converse by means of poems, I am convinced she would compare favorably with them. But here in the Palace there are no other consorts or empresses to keep Her Majesty on her mettle day and night, and there are no ladies-in-waiting in any of the other households who can really

challenge us, with the result that all of us, men and women alike, lack any sense of rivalry and are far too easygoing.”⁵⁶

This passage from Murasaki’s diary expresses the busy state of affairs of ladies in service to women of high status and underscores Shōshi’s preeminence at court. Being the mother of two Imperial Princes and holding the rank of Empress, Shōshi was in a position of great prominence. Murasaki illustrates this through a comparison with another lady who is far less involved in court politics. While Murasaki longed for the less stressful existence of service in the entourage of a more politically obscure lady, it is clear that Empress Shōshi was intricately involved in the affairs of court. The ladies in service to Shōshi were constantly busy with the coming and going of important people such as Michinaga. Additionally, because she was a beloved companion of Emperor Ichijō, Shōshi frequently left her quarters to visit him. Being in the spotlight as ladies-in-waiting to an unrivaled empress, Murasaki and her cohorts were constantly subject to scrutiny and criticism. By contrast, Murasaki claims that the ladies in this more obscure entourage had a great deal of free time and lived a kind of idyllic existence akin to those of the characters of her *Tale of Genji*. While likely an exaggeration, this dream-like lifestyle is certainly out of the reach of Murasaki. For as she so aptly states there “are no other consorts or empresses to keep [Shōshi] on her mettle” and her ladies-in-waiting could not live lives of ease. In light of Murasaki’s remarks, it seems reasonable to assume that regardless of whether or not Shōshi is recorded to have participated in the political actions of Michinaga, it is very unlikely that she was not a key player.

56. Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu*, 123-125.

As we learn from the examples of Senshi, Rinshi, and Shōshi the authority of elite women in the late Heian period was complicated and multifaceted. With Senshi and Shōshi we see how the political interests of younger male relatives—a son or a brother—served as a way of justifying their assumption of the mantle of authority attached to the position of Empress. Giving birth to a child eligible to be a future Emperor was in itself a prestigious event for an Imperial Consort or Empress. In addition the growth of kinship ties strengthened the authoritative legitimacy of women of imperial rank who were closely connected with the authority of the Emperor and yet could not hold the title themselves due to changes in court custom. At the same time we also see that this feminine etiquette of appearing less involved in court power struggles resulted in a kind of partnership as seen between Shōshi and Michinaga wherein a male family member exercised the titular authority of the woman.

CHAPTER IV

SPATIAL AND AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS OF GENDER

In this chapter I expand upon my analysis of the aesthetic of womanhood in the Heian court with an examination of the significance of the aesthetic of seclusion and its relation to gender and status more broadly. In this way this chapter sheds light on the similarities and differences between the gendered performance of men and women by addressing the interplay of class and gender. In this effort I am inspired by the work of Takeda Sachiko in drawing parallels between concepts of beauty for men and women in the Heian period. Takeda Sachiko has argued rather convincingly that standards for physical beauty were often the same for both men and women, with the male protagonists of *The Tale of Genji*—Genji, Kaoru, Niou—described as being akin to women in their physical appearance. In particular Takeda cites the passage wherein Genji's retainers happen upon him while he is sleeping and mistake him for a woman given his soft and languid pose. However, the concept of beauty for men and women was not entirely the same as women were never compared to men in an expression of beauty and men could also be complemented by being described as brave or manly.¹ In light of Takeda's work on the non-binary but also unequal standard of beauty there is much that can be said about the gendered structure of the Heian court and its relation to the aesthetics of gender.

As Takeda argues, literary sources such as the *Tale of Genji* characterize attractive men as being in the same category as women. In much the same way we see

1. Sachiko, Takeda, *Ifuku de yominaosu Nihon shi: dansō to ōken* (Tōkyō: Asahi Shinbunsha, 1998), 47-68.

that concepts of controlled visibility spanned across genders and were not necessarily the distinguishing feature between genders. These parallels in shared standards of beauty with the permeability of private space, including the living quarters of women, indicates a larger phenomenon of fluidity both with respect to gender and the distinction between public and private aspects of life. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that there were no distinctions of any kind. As the above examples show there were certain noticeable differences between the gendered roles of men and women. In particular even though standards of beauty may have been the same for men and women, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* states that beauty is particularly important for women in a way that it is not for men.² I believe that this difference affected the greater importance placed upon the controlled visibility of women. Perhaps the stronger emphasis upon female beauty can also account for the fact that women could only be considered beautiful as women rather than being heralded as embodying other male traits that were not considered feminine. Therefore, while in the previous chapters I have placed more emphasis upon exploring the conceptual differences between genders, in this chapter I propose a more nuanced way of understanding the aesthetic similarities and differences between men and women. The particular aesthetic that I explore is that of seclusion or privacy. To this end I examine textual and visual sources that give reference to the differentiation of inner and outer spaces, of controlled spaces and uncontrolled spaces. The conclusion that emerges from this investigation suggests that there was a gendered aspect of seclusion. However,

2. Tamemitsu purportedly favored two of his daughters over the others. The text suggests that this must have been due to the plainness of the other daughters as Tamemitsu was said to have claimed that “beauty was everything in a daughter.” William H. McCullough and Helen Craig McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes: Annals of Japanese Aristocratic Life in the Heian Period* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1980), 162.

the appearance of seclusion was connected to class as much as to gender also—ironically—to the *visible* display of elite seclusion.

By taking a nuanced approach to the aesthetic of gender I hope to find a way around the concepts of public and private spheres with respect to the Heian court. I believe this is important because numerous scholars have drawn attention to the inadequacy of these terms in describing the social and political environment of the Heian court. For instance Cameron Hurst makes the argument that many important decisions in the Heian court were conducted in private, in the personal relations between Michinaga and the Emperor. This implied not only that official positions were not a prerequisite for involvement in official matters of the court but also that there was no practical distinction between the public and private in the Heian court. Hurst's discussion of Michinaga's successful use of marriage politics underscores this.³ Moreover in his discussion of the relationship between court aristocrats and provincial governors Hurst emphasizes the ambiguity between boundaries of public and private wherein a governor's private contribution of funds to public buildings could impact the aristocrats' decision to grant or deny the position of governor.⁴ Likewise Fukutō and Watanabe propose the view that loss

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3. G. Cameron Hurst, *Insei: Abdicated Sovereigns in the Politics of Late Heian Japan, 1086-1185* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 10-35.
 4. G.Cameron Hurst, "Kugyō and Zuryō: Center and Periphery in the Era of Fujiwara no Michinaga," in *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries*, ed. Mikael Adolphson, Edward Kamens, and Stacie Matsumoto (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 88-90.
 5. Sanae Fukutō and Takeshi Watanabe, "From Female Sovereign to Mother of the Nation: Women and Government in the Heian Period," in *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries*, ed. Mikael Adolphson, Edward Kamens, and Stacie Matsumoto (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 15-34.

of the official position of sovereign did not remove women from positions of influence.⁵ Tonomura makes the point that the life of a woman in service at court was not confined to the private sphere and that such terms as public and private are of little use in describing the court dynamic.⁶ In their effort to make sense of the concept of public and private in the Heian court to a certain extent these scholars attribute public to having official titles and private to the lack of official titles, with Heian kinship and marriage patterns meaning that official court status was not necessary for having influence in the decision-making of the court.

I believe that the problem of a nebulous public and private can more usefully be addressed in terms of visibility. In this chapter I propose an interpretive framework for the aristocratic performance of status and gender that goes beyond the binary system of public and private and male and female. As discussed in chapters one and two the aesthetic of gender performance did not always give an accurate reflection of reality and we cannot assume that the ideal necessarily accounted for all experiences. However, I think that the ideal of limited visibility, if not the reality, gives a sense of the aesthetic value shaping the world view of the court. This examination therefore addresses the ways in which limited visibility was a performance of status more generally, in addition to gender. As a part of moving beyond the dualistic framework of public and private this chapter seeks to create a more nuanced interpretive framework that accounts for the

6. Hitomi Tonomura, "Court and Bakufu in Her Flesh: Nijō's Contribution to a Dual Polity, in *Currents in medieval Japanese history: essays in honor of Jeffrey P. Mass*, ed. Gordon Berger et al (Los Angeles, CA: Figueroa Press, 2009), 217-266.

participation of both men and women in the affairs of court. This will largely be conducted through a discussion of the practice of controlling the visibility of elite persons. Therefore, the association of Heian aristocratic ladies with seclusion will be seen in the larger context of controlled visibility.

Controlled Visibility

From an examination of the text *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* there is a sense that there was an understanding of a connection between a person's visibility and social status. Although perhaps counterintuitive at first glance, decreased visibility was associated with elevated status. This was not an exclusively female practice, with elite men as well as women riding in curtained carts. Of particular prominence was the figure of the Emperor. It is important to note that the effort to control visibility did not entail becoming completely invisible. Rather, the goal of controlled visibility was to draw attention to what was not seen, to reinforce the mystery and awe of exalted status. This attention to demarcating status difference by differences in visibility or "publicity" (though convenient, as noted above this term also involves problematic associations) makes sense when we consider the living conditions of the inhabitants of the Heian court. As discussed in Chapter II, individuals of the court were seldom alone and had little space not shared with others. It is in this context that we should consider the significance of elite individuals who were able to create their own spaces. In this way we see that the act of remaining visibly hidden from view served as a demonstration of status and power. As will be seen, what is referred to as "power" was much more than the ability to create and maintain a separate space, as it also involved the cultivation of an aesthetic of

inactivity that was off-set by the labor of surrounding individuals of lower rank.

Therefore, the control of visibility was directly connected not only to the material wealth needed to maintain a separate space but also to the funds to support a retinue of attendants to make such a life possible. Being much more visible, the actions of the attendants displayed the status of the individuals they served.

While the ability to control the gaze of others arose out of material wealth and knowledge of fashion, thus demarcating those of means from those who lacked them, it is also important to discuss the power of gaze in creating subjects and objects, those who watch and those who are watched. After examining the illustrations accompanying *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* it becomes clear that certain kinds of individuals were made more readily visible to the viewer while others are suggested by the presence of litters or screens. With the reasonable assumption that *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* was compiled for the perusal of a small group of hereditary aristocrats, particularly those descended from Michinaga, it can be surmised that the view we see in these images is that of an aristocrat.⁷ The act of viewing then takes place on multiple fronts as the assumed viewer is also a participant. The viewer sees a picture depicting an event at court while at the same time taking note of the high-ranking individuals hidden behind blinds and curtains. Rather than a clear demarcation between public and private, the act of viewing and acknowledging the ability or inability of all involved parties to escape scrutiny exists as more of a graduated continuum.

7. Though as seen in Chapter II individuals of midranking backgrounds were also keenly interested in depictions of elite aristocratic life.

A Tale of Flowering Fortunes reveals that the inhabitants of the Heian court were greatly concerned with the gaze of other courtiers. As Edith Sarra argues, women of the court were greatly concerned with being observed unawares.⁸ While *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* does suggest that women were particularly concerned with this issue, it is also evident that men—the Emperor especially—were subject to great efforts of limiting visibility. While these instances of ritual seclusion were often compulsory, given the individual's status, the compulsory aspect does not necessarily negate the power exhibited in the control of visibility. The Emperor in particular is frequently noted to have observed ritual seclusion. The power to create these controlled places served as a visual demonstration of the status of the Emperor to those who witnessed the implements of his seclusion. Even mundane events could make use of space in such a way as to announce the Emperor's status. For instance, Emperor Murakami is noted to have passed the tedium of ritual seclusion by summoning his childless consorts to play games of backgammon and *go* for his amusement. The Emperor was not only secluded from the world outside the palace as illustrations of Murakami and his consorts depict the Emperor as partially hidden from the consorts by blinds. The viewer only glimpses the folds in the robes of the seated Emperor, his face and upper body entirely obscured. In this illustration of Emperor Murakami's consorts at play, the view offered is akin to that of the Emperor seated behind his blinds. While the Emperor occupies a separate more visually controlled space even in the presence of his consorts, as individuals of lower status the consorts exist in a more visually accessible space. Still, the proliferation of

8. Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women's Memoirs* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999), 18-23.

walls and screens makes it clear that this is an inner, segregated space and as such the consorts appear relaxed and absorbed in their games of *go*, backgammon, character parts, and jackstones without concern that they might be visible to the viewer. While the nature of this view of the imperial consorts might have a certain voyeuristic quality to it, it should be noted that Emperor Murakami is not subject to the viewer's casual gaze in the same fashion. We can see that he is there, situated behind partially raised screens decorated with large trefoil knots.⁹ As we will see, this scene of the Emperor and his consorts is not the only image to create an ambiguous distinction between public and private. The creation of such images could very well have contributed to a blurring between notions of anything resembling a separate public and private, given the visibility of the Emperor's ladies in their daily affairs. As is discussed later, I argue that the Heian court did not have a clearly distinct public and private.

Again in the illustration of Emperor Murakami's moon-viewing banquet we see an interior space made available for the viewer's perusal, the theme of viewing made more palpable by the occasion of the event. Even though the Emperor is mostly obscured by his blinds the spatial composition indicates his presence. The landscape trays are oriented toward him, making clear the superiority of the Emperor's gaze.¹⁰ Moreover, the ascension of a new Emperor was an occasion that particularly emphasized the role of controlled visibility in setting the Emperor apart from the high-ranking aristocrats who attended the event. Eighteen ladies shielded the Emperor from view behind long-handled Chinese fans. Once he had taken his seat, two ladies raised one side of the curtains.

9. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 72, 73.

10. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 93.

Though the Emperor held an official position of great prominence in the affairs of the court, he was nevertheless secluded from view.

In much the same way women of status utilized screens and curtains to control their visibility. A significant and reoccurring theme in regards to the visibility of elite women is the attention to wondering what must they must look like under their screens and curtains. The contrast between women of higher and lower rank is particularly evident in *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*' description of Gosechi dancing girls. While the Emperor and high ranking ladies observed the dances from behind their screens, the Gosechi dancers were exposed to scrutiny, the text noting that only those who were exceptionally pretty must not be embarrassed. While these dances were no doubt appreciated for their entertainment value, it is also important to consider that the practice of holding these spectatorial events may have reinforced the practice of more harshly scrutinizing the appearance of ladies who were not of high rank. At other times nurses and other serving women are described to be competing with one another in their costumes. Moreover, the description of Emperor Murakami's consorts makes a distinction between the childless consorts who entertained the Emperor and those with children who were not required to perform such a duty.¹¹ This is significant as it implies that women of lower rank were characterized by a degree of visibility—connected in part

11. It is also possible that a consort's seniority and demands of family life could have also played a role in determining which consorts were called to entertain the Emperor. I think it reasonable to assume from the description of imperial consorts in *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* that such women would have had a number of servants to help care for their imperial children. Thomas Conlan has also argued that the bond between child and wet nurse could be stronger than that between the child and the actual birth parents. The question of age or seniority is best addressed with examples of consorts who failed to produce children and subsequently declined in influence when their younger rivals gave birth.

to their greater reliance upon drawing the attention of male patrons—that made it necessary to worry about their appearance.

A Tale of Flowering Fortunes often notes how women of high rank are *said* to be beautiful and there seems to be a general association between rank and beauty. For instance, in determining his future consorts, Emperor Kazan is aware of the rumors that Enshi, daughter of Prince Tamehira is beautiful. On another occasion the author expresses an interest in imagining what might be transpiring behind the blinds as Senior Grand Empress Shōshi enjoyed a rare meeting of her sons, then both Emperor and Crown Prince.¹²

A Tale of Flowering Fortunes also suggests that controlling visibility could be a kind of psychological as well as physical retreat for women. For instance on the Fiftieth Day celebration after the birth of Michinaga's grandson, Prince Atsuhira, some of Michinaga's sons burst into the room of a group of ladies-in-waiting. Not wishing to be seen the ladies do their best to hide behind a curtain stand.

Women also engaged in rituals that involved retreating from sight when preparing for and recovering from birth. While by nature birth and recovery from birth would be expected to take place within the inner spaces of a woman's living quarters, the attention drawn to these events by the noisy commissioning of sutra readings emphasized the ability of high ranking women and their families to create these special and controlled ritual spaces. These rituals would also have served to underscore the growing class boundaries between those women who were imperial consorts and mothers of imperial

12. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 125, 126, 632.

children and those women of the lady-in-waiting class who tended to their needs and provided the labor that allowed women of rank to engage in ritual displays of seclusion and psychological retreat. For instance Empress Shōshi gives birth in the ninth month and did not leave her curtain-dais until the tenth of the tenth month.¹³ The point here is not that privacy during birth was necessarily unique to the upper classes, rather the point is that the degree and duration to which privacy could be obtained differed according to class.

The rituals surrounding birth in some ways served similar functions as the ritual seclusion performed by men of high rank. As with birth these instances of ritual seclusion could also be seen a means of psychological retreat in the event of death or illness. For instance Michitsuna is noted to have performed ritual seclusion after the death of his wife Naka no Kimi. Emperors and noblemen alike engaged in ritual seclusion as a result of illness or in order to prepare for longevity rituals. For instance at age forty-two Michinaga is recorded to have desired to enter ritual seclusion to prepare for a pilgrimage to Kinbusen in order to perform longevity rites, though the demands of court ceremonies prevented him from doing so. Emperor Murakami is also noted to have observed additional forms of ritual seclusion during an illness. Furthermore, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* also gives reference to the observance of certain prescribed ritual seclusion days.¹⁴ While retreating to controlled space may have been a form of comfort when beset by death and other unavoidable events, it appears that the performance of these rituals of luxury was also important in displaying status.

13. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 272, 273, 281.

14. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 94, 235, 244, 257.

Visibility and Lower Status

The significance of controlled visibility is particularly evident when circumstances prevent it from being possible. On one such occasion, a palace fire during daylight forced a group of ladies to expose themselves, an action considered rather unseemly. Also, after her brother Korechika's assault against ex-Emperor Kazan, Empress Teishi is beset by the imperial police. Despite Korechika's offense against the retired sovereign, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* is very clear about the injustice done to Empress Teishi during the search for her brother.¹⁵ "No one is supposed to so much as pass in front of her guards' quarters without at least removing his hat, but now those unspeakable fellows have come crowding in almost to her chambers, tearing down blinds and reducing her to a shocking state of misery."¹⁶ Because the imperial police acted on behalf of the affronted ex-Emperor a comparison can be made to the illustrations of Emperor Murakami observing his consorts while seated behind a screen. In these instances we see that possessing the prerogative to force the visibility of others is a sign of authority though we should also note that restricting privacy as a means of policing is not unique to Heian society. Similarly, a loss in status could make it more difficult for women to maintain their secluded lifestyles. For instance, Empress Teishi bemoans her pregnancy that took place after the death of her father and the banishment of her brothers. No longer does she have the influence to command the attention of Buddhist priests to satisfactorily perform the sutra readings, an important part of the ritual seclusion during pregnancy. Teishi's inability to commission sutra readings is a reminder of the two-

15. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 281, 287, 438.

16. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 189.

pronged nature of controlled visibility as it entailed not only the creation of a separate space but also required that the seclusion and perceived leisure of the elite patron be contrasted by the visible labor of their clients.¹⁷

Illustrations depicting scenes in Senior Grand Empress Senshi's life draw attention to her position as a subject relative to her more objectified servants. As with illustrations of Emperor Murakami, Senshi is hidden from view and performs no visible action herself, yet it is also understood that she is the focus of attention, the agent causing the action to take place. On her trip to Ishiyama Senshi remains inside the blinds of her ox-carriage while her retinue of male servants walks on foot. Senshi's longevity celebration at the Tsuchimikado Mansion is a prime example of the use of illustrations to convey the significance of viewing. The subject of this illustration is particularly apt for displaying the topic of viewing as it is centered around the spectatorship of dances in honor of Senshi's long life. The positioning of the figures makes it clear that they are all gathered to watch (and scrutinize) the performance of the dancers. Senshi remains behind her blinds and the women present do their best to hide their faces beneath clothing. Therefore, the attempts of these women to hide their faces are of a different nature from Senshi's sequestration behind blinds. Because of her status Senshi does not have to make special efforts to conceal herself. By contrast the ladies who hide their faces have no such luxury, underscored by the fact that they are shown hiding themselves from view rather than causing others to do so for them.¹⁸ Those who are seen act for the purpose of those who watch. Images such as these can provide insight into how authority was performed

17. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 228.

18. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 238, 242, 243.

through the creation of clearly delineated roles corresponding to status. In this sense it is significant that certain individuals—and not others—are represented as visually available.

Like the view of Senshi in her ox-carriage, illustrations of ex-Emperor Kazan and Emperor Go-Ichijō's travels provide a wealth of information about the interplay of status and visibility. The illustration of ex-Emperor Kazan's carriage during the Kamo Festival procession draws attention to the ex-Emperor's ostentatious and very visible presence. Moreover, the spectators gathered on the view-stand are clearly gazing at Kazan's entourage. Of particular interest are the headdresses of Kazan's attendants. Made from *aoi* they are clearly not an article of everyday use and their presence could very well add to the interest of the spectators. I would argue that the act of spectatorship in this instance is a political¹⁹ one in that it creates and reinforces a hierarchy of status. In this sense the spectators are also active participants in Kazan's procession as their gaze imparts meaning to the scene. While Kazan's attendants are plainly visible, he himself remains secluded within the blinds of his carriage. The illustration depicting Emperor Go-Ichijō's litter on its way to Kamo shares similar characteristics. The litter itself is occupied by Grand Empress Shōshi and her son the Emperor but the viewer sees only the stateliness of the litter and the surrounding entourage. The weight of the litter is supported by twelve attendants and there are a number of additional men carrying bows or swords, two of whom are on horseback. We also see spectators observing the procession, underscoring

19. See my discussion of the state of scholarship on women and Heian court politics in Chapter II. In a continuation with Chapter II, part of my objective with this chapter is to illustrate that court politics were not bound by separate spheres of public and private, thus suggesting the need to look for political underpinnings in daily human relations.

the awareness of the consequences of visibility.²⁰ As with Kazan's procession, the spectators are important because their presence provides an audience for this performance.

The scene of Shōshi observing the planting of a rice field contains multiple layers of viewing. Shōshi sits behind her trefoil knot-decorated blinds observing the scene. The viewer is unable to see more than the hem of her robes. Court attendants are seated on the veranda near her, fixing their gaze on the lower-ranking townsfolk. Some men engage in music and dance, kicking their legs and drawing the attention of on-lookers. One individual in particular lifts a finger to point at the spectacle. Others gape open-mouthed. It appears to be raining and the young women working in the rice field wear wide-brimmed hats to keep dry. Other individuals, such as the field boss, take shelter beneath umbrellas. The field boss directs his gaze toward the young women planting rice while the young women themselves are occupied with their labor. It is important to note that nearly all of the individuals have their eyes averted from the direction of Shōshi. Despite the magnificence of her presence, garbed in multiple layers, she and her attendants are not subject to the gaze of the commoners who perform labor. Rather, Shōshi and her attendants occupy a physically elevated position, the better for overseeing the activities below while at the same time making them more remote and inaccessible. The musicians and laborers move with the knowledge that they are being observed by individuals of higher status.²¹

20. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 256, 465.

21. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 590, 591.

The illustration depicting Grand Empress Kenshi's ladies-in-waiting preparing for her banquet makes use of the display of the activity of Kenshi's ladies to underscore the influence of the Grand Empress. Like the scene of Emperor Murakami being entertained by his ladies, this scene offers a voyeuristic insight into the living space of ladies-in-waiting. Despite all their blinds, curtains, and screens the frantic activities of the court ladies are laid bare for the viewer to scrutinize.²² Some ladies engage in sewing while others blacken their teeth or otherwise adjust their appearances. Still others wait for the arrival of their fans and fuss over their clothing. The interior space of these ladies' living quarters is made visible for the viewer, whereas Kenshi is nowhere to be seen. The presence of blinds does not truly make this a private space much as Kenshi's absence does not indicate her lack of involvement.²³

Beauty and Viewership

Women of higher rank were certainly not unconcerned with their appearance, but part of their status meant that they were observed via their screens, curtains, carriages and litters. As noted in the discussion of Senior Grand Empress Shōshi's tonsure, great attention was given to the aesthetic quality of furnishings such as screens and curtains. Moreover, the sight of the certain styles of vehicles also conveyed information about the occupant, drawing attention to the visibility of the occupant's relative invisibility. Litters for instance were only to be used by those of imperial rank and were only appropriate for

22. While a picture by definition allows the viewer to observe, my point with this particular example is that the subject matter in question is something that the ladies-in-waiting may not have wanted to be made visible.

23. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 648, 649.

the most formal of occasions whereas Chinese carriages indicated less formality.

Therefore it was determined that a litter would not be appropriate for the funeral of Michinaga's daughter Kenshi because she had given up her imperial rank.²⁴

It should not be assumed that women necessarily wished to be entirely invisible. As discussed above a great deal of attention was given to a lady's method of transportation as it was one of the more visible displays of her presence. As such it is clear that there were desirable limits to a woman's seclusion from view. Emperor Murakami hears of the musical talent of his daughter by his consort Masahime. While listening to his daughter's playing, he asks Masahime to explain the musical piece. While the daughter's behavior was described as being overly formal, Murakami is particularly annoyed by the formality of Masahime who insists on remaining behind her three-foot high curtains (*kichō* 几帳) in the Emperor's presence. Just as a loss of status could prevent women from maintaining their accustomed degree of seclusion, a loss of status could also prevent women from drawing desired attention and affection. Though Shinshi once held the favor of Emperor Kazan as a beloved consort, his waning interest in her results in her abandonment of court life. Kazan is said to have paid no notice to her departure. Once gone it was said that the court appeared as though Shinshi had never been there at all. Clearly the entire affair was devastating for Shinshi—suggesting the need for a proper balance between the visible and nonvisible.. In this instance invisibility signifies a lack of control. Similarly *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* explains how Michitaka's wife Kishi was well aware of the customs of the Imperial Palace and that it

24. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 547, 748, 749.

would not do for their daughter Teishi to remain in seclusion at home. As a result the couple presented her at court and soon afterward she became a junior consort.²⁵

Because it was neither desirable for a woman to be too easily observed nor too hidden, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* also gives many references to the elegance and beauty of women who achieve a desired balance between the two. Rather than being removed from the minds of courtiers by remaining secluded in their private quarters these women succeed in drawing attention to their avoidance of the general gaze. Much of this attention revolved around the visibility of women's clothing behind their blinds. For women, high status was associated with beauty and women were often regarded as beautiful even if their physical countenance was unknown. With her body obscured, a woman's breeding and material resources constituted the basis for her beauty as knowledge of color coordination and wealth or connections were necessary for obtaining such garments. Therefore, while controlled visibility was not limited to women, the particular emphasis upon female beauty gave an added layer of meaning to women's careful self-display.

The most common descriptions of elite women address the beauty of their sleeves and hems showing beneath curtains and screens. In this we also see that both elite men and women were judged by the careful presentation of their attendants as well as to their own dress. While the open display of attendants in service to an elite individual could be a sign of status, another method of displaying one's material and social well-being involved the fashionable partial seclusion of female attendants. *A Tale of Flowering*

25. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 90, 127, 151,

Fortunes gives no reference to male attendants receiving the same treatment so it can be inferred that for lower-ranking individuals seclusion was more closely associated with women whereas at the highest levels of court rank it applied somewhat more evenly. The vast amount of attention given to descriptions of women's clothing showing beneath their blinds and curtains is illustrative of this point.

A Purification Day description of Michinaga and Meishi's daughter, the imperial consort Kanshi, gave great attention to her sleeves with the statement that they "cascaded in resplendent profusion."²⁶ This alludes not only to the skill of matching and coordinating layers of colors but also of the wealth (supplied by Kanshi's parents) necessary to afford such voluminous amounts of expensive fabric. Additionally, much of the charm of the imperial consort Genshi is said to have come from the color combinations of robes peeping out of her hem and sleeves, delighting the Crown Prince. Knowledge of appropriate levels of self-display was therefore not to be overlooked in the struggle amongst imperial consorts to gain favor in the hopes of becoming the mother of a future Emperor. Additionally, a scene from Prince Tamehira's childhood of a hunting party at Funaoka Hill gives much attention to the partial visibility of women. The Ladies of the Empress are distinguished by their white silk trains with seashore patterns, trailing below the blinds of carriages. While the appearance of the Empress herself is not mentioned, her carefully concealed yet visible ladies-in-waiting serve as a demonstration of her exalted status, with particular attention given to the sumptuousness of the fabric with which she has dressed them. On her longevity celebration, Senshi's ladies-in-

26. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 448, 449.

waiting are also described as having beautiful sleeves and skirts showing behind the blinds. One year at the annual Gosechi dances, a comparison of the comportment of ladies-in-waiting reveals Sanenari's to be superior. Rather than boldly displaying their costumes for all eyes to see, they instead allow only a glimpse of their ensembles by remaining behind blinds. This was seen as a far more impressive display than that of the ladies who appeared without blinds.²⁷

While a woman's ample robes (and the robes of her female attendants) provided an indication of her status, her screens themselves could also be highly decorative. For instance Shinshi, the daughter of Major Captain Asateru was noted to have been presented at the court of Emperor Kazan in a very elaborate fashion. A description of Princess Teishi's furnishings gives great attention to the articles used to conceal her from view. Her curtain stands were gossamer over damask and were dyed a shade of purple that darkened at the bottom. She also had matching dais draperies with purple cords in varying shades. Pictures painted on her draperies were in blues and greens with gold and silver dust. For those fortunate enough to be allowed into her presence, Teishi's visually impressive furnishings would surely have left no doubt as to her station. The presentation of an imperial consort at court was an event to display the woman's wealth and taste, and like Princess Teishi, such women would have used the splendor of their material wealth as a proxy for their assumed bodily beauty.²⁸ In this sense it appears that the concept of a

27. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 98, 99, 166, 241, 290.

28. The great importance placed upon outward presentation as the measure of a woman's beauty could also be read to mean that in general the presentation itself was a woman's beauty. However, comments such as those regarding Shōshi upon her presentation at court—wherein she is assumed to be physically beautiful—also suggest that there may have been some distinction between bodily beauty and the beauty of the outward presentation. A famous

woman's beauty extended beyond her own body and there was an implicit assumption that the external beauty of a woman's furnishings, servants, and conveyances must reflect her own physical beauty. The entrance of Regent Yoritada's daughter Shishi to the court of Emperor Kazan also draws parallels between status and beauty. While Shishi is described as being beautiful her visibility is controlled and therefore the assumption that she is beautiful must be based either on her rank, as the Regent's daughter, or on the visible aspects of her presence at court. "It is hard to say what Shishi looked like, since not even her own ladies were allowed a glimpse of her face until they had been with her for seven or eight years, but she is unlikely to have been ugly."²⁹ Perhaps this requirement of several years of service before meeting their lady helped to weed out those who might speak negatively of Shishi's appearance. Or perhaps the spread of such rumors—whether true or not—was merely a way to add to the allure of Shishi.

From Public and Private to Household Units

Illustrations from romances such as *The Tale of Genji Scrolls* present another perspective on the permeability of boundaries of public and private. Like the illustrations from *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* these illustrations are characterized by human-made spatial divisions. Because of their theme of courtship these illustrations give particular attention to significance of inner and outer spaces, with male protagonists often situated on the peripheries of the residences of women. Another theme that emerges from these illustrations is that while the inner spaces of women's residences are typically portrayed

literary example from the *Tale of Genji* would be Suetsumuhana who is unattractive despite assumptions that she must be beautiful.

29. McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, 125, 542.

as the center of activity, both in terms of artistic composition and the level of detail applied to depicting interior furnishings, areas beyond residential verandas are only loosely defined in terms of detail and quite often occupy a more marginal position in the composition. Yet even as these images create a contrast between inner and outer spaces they also highlight the permeability of these boundaries as often seen in the theme of men spying on women as they go about their daily lives.

The scene of Kurōdo watching Tamakazura's daughters playing *go* is an example of this theme. The composition of this image clearly demarcates the space occupied by Tamakazura's daughters, relegating Kurōdo to an outer edge, separated from the main activity by the strong diagonal line of a wall. The vertical lines of the blinds through which he peeps further impinge upon his space with the result that Kurōdo appears to be situated within a small box at the edge of the illustration. By contrast the area occupied by the women appears expansive and dynamic. A cherry tree growing in the middle of their inner garden visually emphasizes this interior space. Yet even with the physical and symbolic separation of Kurōdo from the women it is evident from the subject of peeping that the inner residential space is not entirely separated from the space outside its borders. The composition of this image is very similar to the illustration of Kaoru spying upon Oigimi and Naka no Kimi as they practice with musical instruments. In a certain sense the transparent blinds appear to serve the purpose of creating segregated space only to draw attention to the inevitability of the merging of these inner and outer spaces.

The treatment of the outer spaces of these images in contrast to the inner spaces is also telling with respect to the roles of public and private in the Heian court. Rather than

portraying distinct public and private spaces these images portray a multiplicity of inner spaces with boundaries that bleed into the more nebulous outer space. Inner spaces with their carefully controlled walls and inner subdivisions are the centers of activity. The control of space afforded by furnishings lends a structure and symbolic meaning to these spaces that is lacking in the less bounded spaces on the margins. Therefore in a certain sense the images suggest a lack of any kind of organized public space with ostensibly private spaces being the only spaces of significance. However, given that the concepts of public and private are defined as existing in opposition to each other, the inner spaces in these images cannot be seen as truly private spaces. This is underscored by images implying the physical and symbolic permeability of the walls of these inner spaces.

In light of the above discussion let us revisit the issue raised at the beginning of this chapter, particularly with regard to the similarities and distinctions between male and female performances of visibility. We see that the aesthetic of femininity was not diametrically opposed to the aesthetic of masculinity. In some ways the overlapping but diverging relationship between male and female gender performance also parallels the relationship between public and private spaces. Though it is not a perfect analogy, it is important to consider the nature of gendered spaces in light of the Heian concept of gender differences and similarities. With the greater importance placed upon indoor seclusion for women –and possibly also because of matrilocal residency practices-- depictions of interior spaces appear more often as defined by the presence of women than men (with an exception for spaces associated with the Emperor). At the same time, the outside spaces where high ranking women cannot show their faces are less clearly defined visually and hardly appear to equal the significance of interior spaces. Because of

this discrepancy I do not believe it is accurate to simply characterize the one as feminine and the other as male. Given the style of Heian politics and the ways in which intimate interior settings were often the locations of important political decisions, I think it could be more accurately said that the Heian court was characterized by a series of elite household units that were neither entirely public nor private.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

One of my objectives in this project has been to illustrate the necessity of giving attention to the way that societies construct their own concepts of gender, with my particular focus being upon the Heian construction of womanhood. By examining the available writings of women themselves as well as historical chronicles, and visual sources I have attempted to piece together an image of the Heian construction of femininity. I believe that having an understanding of this construction is important because it helps us to gain a sense of how courtiers of the Heian era might have conceived of their situation in life and of what their motivations might have been. Moreover, I believe that this sort of analysis is especially important for societies more distantly removed from our own, lest we make unfounded assumptions based on our own cultural practices. With this in mind, I have attempted to illustrate the complexity of Heian womanhood as understood by the women who experienced it.

One important theme regarding Heian womanhood that emerges from this analysis is the way in which power is shared between men and women in ways that benefit both parties. I believe that this practice of power-sharing can be seen as analogous to the relationships based on disparate levels of status that Cameron Hurst describes in “*Kugyō* and *Zuryō*,” as existing between elite courtiers such as Fujiwara no Michinaga who provided political backing to appoint provincial governors who in return supplied elite courtiers with the material wealth necessary to support their lifestyles.¹ As residents

1. Hurst, “*Kugyō* and *Zuryō*,” 85-88.

of this court it should come as no surprise that women also engaged in and benefited from these kinds of patron-client relationships and as a result I believe that female participation in the court is deserving of greater scholarly attention than it has heretofore received.

Finally, what was the significance of the Heian aesthetic of womanhood? The above chapters illustrate that adhering to this aesthetic was of great importance in the minds of the authors of the selected texts, many of whom were women. One possible reading could be that these texts served in promoting the existence of gendered restrictions that undermined the agency of woman at court. And though this view is undoubtedly partially true, I would argue that it is also important to consider these texts as a means by which women could exercise their agency. Female gender roles could not have existed without the participation of women. Moreover, as demonstrated above, individual households served as a basis for political organization with the result that competition among female authors of the lady-in-waiting class was often indicative of their membership in separate competing households (Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon are the most notable examples). Scholars such as Joshua Mostow may see the existence of a unified female interest in court with his assertion that women commiserated their shared situation as women by producing written works. However, I believe that the preeminence of individual households as the organizational units of court society would have made it unlikely for these women to identify with their rivals simply because they were female. Therefore, I argue that the rivalry between ladies-in-waiting of separate households should also be considered in the context of the relationship between households. To what extent did the actions of ladies-in-waiting shape the fortunes of the households they served? This is a topic for future research.

A major limitation of this study has been my reliance upon translated materials. A heavy reliance upon works not in their original language always brings the risk of losing important nuances in meaning or even of adding meaning that does not exist in the original text. This problem can arise from differences between modern English and classical Japanese, with the structure of classical Japanese making it difficult for translators to distinguish between speakers in a dialog or to determine the subject of a sentence. For these reasons it is always dangerous to build an argument solely upon translated texts.

This project examines both autobiographical writings of women of the lady-in-waiting class as well as court records and imagery detailing the lives of the court elite. By using a variety of source types I go beyond the limitations and methodological practices that might arise from a more narrow perspective. In this way my varied sources allow me to consider Heian views of femininity from a variety of perspectives as well as to address issues arising from differences of class and authorship.

There are of course other sources and issues that could be addressed in providing a more complete image of the Heian woman, including additional literary sources such as the *Tale of Ise*. In particular, in this study I have not examined the lives of nuns and this would be a valuable topic for future research. Additionally, in this project I have not addressed the issue of female representation of men (or female representation of male attitudes toward women). Moreover, the issue of gendered male and female script deserves attention, particularly with regard to ways in which it could be utilized to convey or belie the gender of the author. The gendered nature of the discourse between

ladies-in-waiting also deserves attention. Though the term gossip might be associated with women's behavior (and thereby color our understanding of the significance of women's speech and writing) Heian men were certainly not unaffected by the spread of unfavorable personal information. Much like controlled visibility, the production and concern with damaging words was not unique to women.

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